NANCY
OF PARADISE COTTAGE

SHIRLEY WATKINS

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by

SHIRLEY WATKINS

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Nancy of Paradise Cottage

CHAPTER I

THE HEROINE GOES TO MARKET

"LET's see—bacon, eggs, bread, sugar, two cans of corn, and jam. Have I gotten everything, Alma?" Nancy, checking off the items in her marketing list, looked over toward her sister, who had wandered to the door and stood gazing out into the street where a gentle September rain was falling. Alma did not answer, seeming to have gone into a dream, and the grocer waited patiently, his pencil poised over his pad.

"Alma, do wake up! Have I forgotten anything? I'm sure there was something else," said Nancy, frowning, and studying her list, with her under lip thrust forward. "I regularly go and forget something every Saturday night, when there's no Hannah to concoct something out of nothing for Sunday luncheon."

"You said you were going to bake a cake—a chocolate layer cake," suggested Alma, turning, and

viewing the proceeding disinterestedly with her hands in her pockets.

"That's it. I have to get flour, and some cooking chocolate, and vanilla. Alma, you've got to help me carry these things. I'm not Goliath."

"Mercy, Nancy, we don't have to take all that home with us, do we? Can't you send them, Mr. Simpson?"

The grocer shrugged apologetically.

"It's Saturday, Miss Prescott, and the last delivery went out at three—all my boys have gone home now or I'd try to accommodate you."

"I do hate to go about looking like an old market woman, with my arms full of brown paper parcels," murmured Alma, *sotto voce* to her sister.

"Goodness, I don't imagine there'll be a grand stand along the way, with thousands watching us through opera glasses," laughed Nancy. "Would you mind telling me whom you expect to meet who'd faint with genteel horror because we take home our Sunday dinner? I don't intend to starve to spare anybody's feelings."

"Last week I was dragging along a bag of potatoes—and—and I met Frank Barrows. And the bag split while I was talking to him, and those hateful potatoes went bumping around all over the pavement. I never was so mortified in my life," said Alma, sulkily.

Nancy shot a keen glance at her sister's pretty face, and her eyes twinkled. Alma's shortage of the American commodity called humor was a source of continual quiet joy to Nancy, who was the only member of the Prescott family with the full-sized endowment of that gift.

"Dear me, whatever did Frank do? Scream and cover his eyes from the awful sight? Had he never seen a raw potato in all his sheltered young life?"

Alma shrugged her shoulders—a slight gesture with which she and her mother were wont to express their hopeless realization of Nancy's lack of finer feelings.

"I don't suppose you would have minded it. But *I* hate to look ridiculous, particularly before anyone like Frank Barrows."

"But, Alma, you funny girl, don't you see that you look a thousand times more ridiculous when you act as if a few potatoes bouncing about were something serious? Don't tell me you stood there gazing off haughtily into the blue distance while Frank gathered up your silly old potatoes? Or did you disown them? Or did you play St. Elizabeth, and expect a miracle to turn them into roses so that they would be less offensive to Frank's aristocratic eyes? Come on now, help me shoulder our provisions. We're members of the Swiss Family Robinson, going back to our hut with our spoils. Pre-

tend we're savages, and this is a desert island, and not respectable Melbrook at all. Next time we go marketing you can disguise yourself with a beard and blue goggles."

Alma laughed unwillingly. She was a dainty and singularly pretty girl—a little bit foolish, and a good bit of a snob, but Nancy adored her, though she enjoyed making good-natured digs at Alma's weak spots.

They took up their bundles, said good-night to Mr. Simpson, and went out.

It was a walk of three miles from the village—or, as it preferred to be called—the town of Melbrook to the Prescotts' house, which lay in the country beyond, a modest little nest enough, where the two girls had grown up almost isolated by their poverty from the gay life of the younger Melbrookians. Alma chafed unhappily against this isolation, chafed against every reminder of their poverty, and, like her mother, once a beauty and a belle, craved the excitement of admiration, luxury and fine things. She was ashamed of the little house, which was shabby, it is true, ashamed of having to wear old clothes, and made herself wretched by envying the richer girls of the neighborhood their beautiful houses, their horses and their endless round of gay times. As Nancy once told her mother, in affectionate reproof, they were always trying to "play rich"

—Mrs. Prescott and Alma. She had tried to teach Alma her own secret of finding life pleasant; but Alma did not love books, nor long solitary walks through the summer woods; and Nancy's ambition of fitting herself to meet the world and make her own living seemed to both Alma and her mother dreary and unfeminine. Somewhere, in the back of her pretty head, Mrs. Prescott cherished the hope and the belief that the two girls would find some way of coming into what she called "their own"—not by Nancy's independent plan of action, but through some easier, pleasanter course. She shuddered at the idea of their making their own living, and opposed Nancy's wish to go to college on the ground that no men liked blue-stocking women, and that therefore Nancy would be an old maid.

"But, Mother darling, we can't just sit back and wait for some young millionaire to come and carry us off?" Nancy would plead, shaking her head. Time was flying, and Nancy was seventeen, and eager to begin her own life. "Let me go—I can work my way through, and Alma can stay at home with you."

"I need you to help me with Alma," was Mrs. Prescott's answer. Nancy felt helpless. Her father, before her, had to his sorrow recognized the hopelessness of driving any common-sense views into Mrs. Prescott's pretty, silly little head. She had

never realized that the decline of the family's fortune had been, in no small measure, due to her. She accounted for it on the grounds of old Mr. Thomas Prescott's inhuman stubbornness and selfishness.

The two girls, leaving the village behind them, were walking briskly through the rain, down the main road, bordered by the imposing country estates of people who had gradually settled on the pretty countryside. Nancy could remember when the hill, where now stood a staring white stone mansion, surrounded by close-clipped lawns and trim gardens, had been a wild, lovely swell of meadow, dotted with clusters of oaks and elms; when in place of the smug little bungalow, with its artificial pond and waterfall, and ornate stone fences, there had been a wooded copse, where squirrels scuttled about among branches of trees, since fallen in the path of a moneyed civilization. Other of the houses, of haughty Mansard architecture, had stood there before she had been born, and it had often seemed to her that the huge, solemn, beautiful old place of Mr. Thomas Prescott had been there since the Creation. As they passed it, they slackened their pace, and despite the weight of bundles which grew heavier every minute, stopped and peered through the bars of the great, wrought-iron gates.

A broad drive, meticulously raked and weeded,

wound away from them under magnificent arching trees, to the portals—Nancy said it would have been impossible to consider Uncle Thomas's door anything but a portal—which were just visible under the low-hanging branches. The rest of the old stone house was screened from the rude gaze of prying eyes, like the face of a faded dowager of the harem; save for the upper half of a massive Norman tower, which thrust itself up out of the nest of green leaves, like the neck of some inquisitive, prehistoric bird.

"I don't believe Uncle Thomas has passed through these gates in fifteen years," said Nancy. "One could almost believe that he had really died and had had himself buried on the grounds, like the eccentric old recluse he is."

"Well, they would have had to have done something with all his money," replied Alma, pressing her forehead against the iron bars; "unless he left everything to his butler, and had the will read in secret. It would be just like him. Oh, Nancy, why are there such selfish old misers in the world? Just think—if he'd just give us the least little bit of all his money. Just enough to get a horse and carriage, and buy some nice clothes, and—and get a pretty house. It wouldn't be anything to him. Mamma says she is sure that he will relent some day."

Nancy shrugged her shoulders. To her mind, it was foolish of her mother to put any hopes on the whims of an old eccentric. Mrs. Prescott was one of those poor optimists who believe earnestly in the miracles of chance, always forgetting that chance works its miracles as a rule only when the way has been prepared for them by the plodding labor of common sense.

"We mustn't count on that, Alma," she said soberly. "There is no use in living on the possibility that Uncle Thomas will relent, and make us rich. It isn't just for the pure love of money that he has been so stingy toward us, I believe. He was never a miser toward Father, you know. I—I think he would have given us everything in the world if—if ——" She hesitated, unwilling to state her private opinion to Alma.

"If what?"

"Well, you see, I think the trouble was this. Come along, we mustn't wait here, or you'll catch cold."

"What do you think the trouble was?" prompted Alma, padding after her sister, and sloshing placidly through the puddles, in all the nonchalant confidence of sound rubbers.

"Well, Alma, you mustn't misunderstand me. I'm afraid you will. You know how I adore Mother. She's so pretty, and—and childlike, and

funny that nobody on earth could ever blame her ——"

"Blame her? For what?" cried Alma, with sudden fire.

"Nothing. Only, Alma, we must realize that sometimes Mother makes little mistakes, and I believe that she has had to pay more heavily for them than she deserves. We've got to try to protect her against them, by looking at life squarely, and wisely, Alma ——"

"Are you going to preach a sermon? What were you going to say about Uncle Thomas?"

"Just this. You know Uncle Thomas was a very clever man. He made every bit of his money himself. Father told me long ago that when Uncle Thomas began in life he did not have a cent in the world; he started out as a plain mill-hand, and then he became a mechanic, and he worked his way up from one rung to another, until through his own talent and pluck he became very, very rich. Well, it's only natural that a man like that should give money its full value—when he's toiled for years at so many cents an hour, he knows just exactly how many cents there are in a dollar. Perhaps he puts too great a value upon it, but certainly we aren't judges of that. You know that Uncle Thomas never married, and when Grandfather died, Uncle Thomas became Daddy's guardian. I believe he

loved Father better than anyone in the world. Who could help it?" Nancy's voice trembled slightly, and she winked back the tears which rose to her eyes at the memory of her father's handsome merry face, which had grown so unaccountably saddened and worn before his early death.

"He gave Father everything he wanted, when he was a boy—you know how Daddy used to tell us how Uncle Thomas would tiptoe up to his room at night and slip gold pieces into his stocking, so that he could find them in the morning, and then when Daddy asked him about it, he would shrug his shoulders, and his eyes would twinkle, and he'd say, 'It must have been Brownies.'"

"I can't imagine how a man who used to be like that could ever have grown so hard and bitter," said Alma.

"Well—then, you see, when Father grew up, Uncle wanted him to be successful for himself. And he was terribly proud of Father when Daddy first came back and told him that he had made five thousand dollars in his first year at business. Then Father told him that he was going to be married. Uncle didn't want him to—not until he had definitely settled himself in life. And then, Father was very young, and Mother only a girl of seventeen—think of it, just my age. But when Uncle saw Mother, he adored her, of course." Nancy paused,

and seemed to have forgotten the rest of her story, but Alma prompted her curiously. She had never heard this tale before, for Nancy had gleaned it bit by bit from her father, when they used to take long walks together through the country, and, putting two and two together, she had been able to get rather close to the real truth of things.

"I know Uncle adored Mother," said Alma, kicking through a pile of wet leaves. "He gave her those lovely Italian earrings, which I'm to have when I'm eighteen. And all that wonderful Venetian lace, which the first one of us to be married is going to have for her wedding gown."

"Yes. Well, then—then after Father and Mother were married things didn't go so very well. Mother was just a girl—just my age, you know, only she was pretty, like you, and, I suppose, a little extravagant. At least, they weren't able to make ends meet very well, although Daddy made a good income—and, anyhow, Uncle Thomas would have thought her extravagant. He didn't see why it was necessary for her to send for her clothes to Paris, and why Father was always worried about bills, when he should have been able to live well within his income. Anyway, Father wasn't able to save a cent, and one day Uncle Thomas came to him and said that he had a very good opportunity for him to invest his savings, so that they would draw a much

better income than what they were giving. The only trouble was that Father didn't have any savings. Then Uncle became furious; he asked Father and Mother what kind of future they thought they were laying up for us, and he scolded Mother terribly for not helping Father. He quoted the Bible about women being the helpmeet of their husbands, and about the parents eating sour grapes and setting the children's teeth on edge. He said that they were taking the path to ruin, and that Father could expect no help from him unless he and Mother economized. But you see, poor Mother always considered Paris dresses and jewellery and expensive dainties the necessities and not just the luxuries of life. I don't suppose she really understood how to economize at all. And anyway, things got worse instead of better. Then, one year, Daddy lost an awful lot of money trying to make some quickly so that he could get his debts cleared up, and start fresh. Instead, he only got in deeper. And—and then he fell ill. And you remember, Alma, when poor Father was dying, Uncle came. And he cried and cried. But when Mother came into the room, he got up and went out, and shut the door behind him. Then he shut the gates of his house against us, too. I think he feels that we—we girls must learn to look at life seriously, to work out our own futures—so that poverty will teach us to be wiser

than—than poor, darling little Mother——" Nancy's voice had sunk, as if she were talking to herself, so that Alma barely heard the last words. She was thinking of Alma, wondering how she could teach her luxury-loving little sister to see life practically, without taking away the joy of it from her.

"We mustn't rely on Uncle Thomas, Alma," she said presently. "We mustn't count on anything but what we can do for ourselves. Remember that, dear. We've got to realize that our lives must run a different course from those of richer girls—we can never do the things they do—but surely they will be richer lives, and happier lives, if—if we rely on no one, ask nothing from anyone, but what we earn"—her head went up—"never struggle for, or want the things that lie beyond our means, but make always the opportunities that lie within our grasp, or *the ones that we can make for ourselves,* serve as stepping stones."

Alma glanced at her sister's sober, handsome face There were times when Nancy looked to her like some brave, gallant, sturdy lad, and there were times when she agreed with Nancy in spite of herself, and against her own inclinations.

"Here we are—home again. And if it isn't the snuggest, cosiest, most cheerful burrow between here and Melbrook, why"—Nancy strode gaily

up the little brick walk with her long, boyish strides, and breaking into a laugh, finished, "I'll beard the Prescott himself—tower, donjon-keep and all!"

CHAPTER II

INSIDE THE COTTAGE

It was what Nancy called the pluperfect hour of the day; that is, of a rainy day. The curtains of the living-room were drawn over the windows, the mellow lamplight dealing kindly with their faded folds. The rain, which had brought with it an early autumn chill, beat rhythmically against the panes, and gurgled contentedly from a water spout, as if it were revelling in the fact that it had had the whole countryside to itself for four-and-twenty hours.

Alma had washed her yellow hair, and had built a fire to dry it by. Nancy, in her dressing-gown and slippers, with her own brown mane braided into a short, thick club, was icing the chocolate cake, helping herself generously to the scrapings in the earthenware bowl. Mrs. Prescott was embroidering. This was her greatest accomplishment, learned in a French convent. Knitting bored her to death, and darning drove her crazy, but she could sit by the hour stitching infinitesimal petals on microscopic flowers, and turning out cake mats, tea-cloths

and fancy collars by the score. Faded only slightly by her forty-odd years, she was still an exquisitely pretty woman, with a Dresden-china face, marred ever so little by the fine lines which drooped from the corners of her delicate nose to the corners of her childish mouth. Her golden hair was barely silvered, her skin as fresh and rosy as Alma's, and her round little wrists, and pink-tipped fingers, Alma might have envied. The lacy dressing-gown she wore, which, at the slightest motion, shook out a faint little whiff of some expensive French perfume, struck an odd note in the shabby room, where the couch sadly displayed a broken spring, and not the most careful placing of furniture that Nancy could devise entirely concealed the holes in the faded carpet.

"We ought to put a glass cover over Mother, the way some people cover French clocks," Nancy said laughingly. "You're much too valuable to get any of the dust of every-day life on you, Mamma."

"I'm getting old, my dear. I only think of my daughters now," said Mrs. Prescott, with a little sigh and pushing a curly wisp of hair back from her face. "I shall be putting on spectacles soon."

"Catch you! You'd go blind as a bat before you'd do any such violence to your beauty. You're like Alma. I had to argue for half an hour to-day to make Alma wear her raincoat. It wasn't becom-

ing, and she'd far rather die of pneumonia than look like a ——"

"A hippopotamus," said Alma. "That's what I look like in the old thing. The sleeves dangle over my hands like a fire hose."

"Nancy, I've come to a definite conclusion in regard to you and Alma, for this winter," said Mrs. Prescott, laying down her embroidery and trying to look practical and decided.

"How much will it cost?" Nancy's eyes twinkled.

"It's not a question of money."

"Nothing ever is—with Mamma and Alma," Nancy thought, but she was silent, and continued to lick the chocolate off her spoon composedly.

"I have thought the whole thing over very carefully, and I am quite sure that the matter of money must not be weighed against the value which it would have for you girls."

"It's not a trip to Europe, is it, Mamma?" asked Alma, quite as if she expected that this might be the case. Indeed, a trip to Europe would have been no more incredible to Nancy than her mother's plan, which Mrs. Prescott proceeded to unfold.

"You see, my dears, living as we do, you girls are absolutely cut off from the opportunities which are so essential to every girl's success in life. This has been a great worry to me. You are growing

older, and you are forming no acquaintances that will be of value to you. For this reason I have decided that the expense of sending you both—for a last year, you understand—to a good school, a smart school, a school where Alma can meet girls who will count for something in social life—is an expense that must be met."

"But — heavens, we've had all the ordinary schooling we need," exclaimed Nancy in amazement. "If—if I could just have a few months' tutoring so that I could take my college exams in the spring—I could work my way through college easily ——"

"I *don't want* you to go to college, Nancy," said Mrs. Prescott irritably. "What in the world is the use of a whole lot of ologies and isms—and ruining your looks over a lot of senseless analyzing and dissecting and everything ——"

"I won't be studying anything useless, Mother dearest. But don't you see that it will be ever so much easier for me to get a position as a teacher if I can show a Bachelor's degree instead of just a smattering of French, or a thimbleful of ancient history?"

"There's no reason why you should think of becoming a teacher," answered Mrs. Prescott. "And I wish you wouldn't talk about it—it's so dreadfully drab and gloomy."

"But I want to make my living in some way."

"If you and Alma marry well, there won't be any reason why you should make your living."

"But, Mother, we can't count on chance, like that. Suppose Alma and I never met a rich man whom we could love—we'd be helpless."

"A year at Miss Leland's will give both of you plenty of opportunities. You'll meet girls there whom you ought to know, girls who will invite you to their houses, through whom you'll meet eligible young men ——"

"The expense of paying for board and tuition at Miss Leland's would be the least of the digging we'd have to do into the family purse. We'd be under obligations to people, which we would never be in a position to repay—we'd be no better than plain, ordinary sponges. I—I couldn't bear it. Besides, the fees at Miss Leland's are terribly high. I could go to college for almost two years on what I'd pay for one year at Miss Leland's—and all that we'd get at that school would be a little French, a smattering of history, dancing and fudge parties."

"And extremely desirable acquaintances."

"But, Mother, we'd never be able to keep up with them on their own scale of living," pleaded Nancy, with a hopeless conviction in her heart that she was talking to the winds. "Girls like Elise Porterbridge and Jane Whiteright have an allowance of a

hundred a month, and anything else they want, when they've spent it."

"You've got money on the brain, Nancy," said Alma, shaking her curls off her face. "You are a regular old miser."

"Well, you're right, perhaps. I—I hate to, heaven knows, but we *do* have to think about it, Alma. It's the poor gamblers who are always counting on a lucky chance that are ruined. I want to be prepared for the worst—and then if something nice turns up, why, wouldn't that be ten times better than if, when we had been counting on the best, the worst should happen?"

"You see, dears," Mrs. Prescott had entirely missed the point of Nancy's last remark, "Uncle Thomas is very old, and I am sure—I am *quite* sure that he will relent."

"Oh, Mother!" Poor Nancy flung up both hands in despair.

"I have entered you both at Miss Leland's, so, really, there is no use in arguing about it any more. And I've already sent the check for the first term. Everything is decided. I didn't tell you until tonight, just because I was afraid that this hard-headed old Nancy of mine would try to argue me out of it; when I *know* that it's the best and wisest thing to do. Nancy, darling, please don't scowl like that. You aren't angry with Mother, are you?"

A soft little hand was laid on Nancy's muscular brown one, and in spite of herself the girl relented, with a whimsical smile and a sigh.

"I'd like to see anyone who could be angry with you for two minutes," she said, burrowing her brown head in the lace on her mother's shoulder.

"That nasty old Uncle Thomas has been angry with me for ten years, very nearly. Isn't he a dreadful old man?" laughed Mrs. Prescott, tweaking Nancy's ear.

"We'll have to get a lot of new clothes if we are going to boarding school." Alma, having spread the towel on the floor, reclined full length in front of the fire, and meditated with satisfaction on the delightful prospect.

"Mamma, if I could just once have a hat with a feather on it—a genuine *plume*, I'd be happy for the rest of my days."

"Wouldn't Alma be lovely?" cried Mrs. Prescott delightedly. "Oh, you don't know how I long to give my daughters everything—everything. One thing you must have, Alma, is a black velvet dress —made very simply, of course. They are so serviceable," she flung this sop to Nancy, who, with her head thrown back, was good-humoredly tracing phantom figures in the air with her forefinger.

"In for a penny, in for a pound," she observed, agreeably. "Oh, darling Uncle Thomas, kindly

lend us a million. We need it, oh, we need it—every hour we need it!"

"Let's set one day aside for shopping," was Alma's bright suggestion; she felt that this would be her element. "We'll go into the city in the morning, get everything done by noon, lunch at Mailliard's and then go to a matinée. I haven't seen a play since Papa took us to see Humpty Dumpty, when Nance and I were little things."

"I've got eighty-three cents," said Nancy. "I'd like to see the color of *your* money, ma'am, before we do any gallivanting."

"Well,—I'm not going to sit here gazing at that cake another minute,—*please* give me a slice, Nancy, sugar-pie, lambkin, — just a wee little scrooch of it," begged Alma, snuffing the handsome chocolate masterpiece of Nancy's culinary skill. Nancy took off a crumb and gave it to her, which elicited a wail of indignation from Alma.

"Well, here you are. And it'll give you a nice tummy-ache, too," predicted Nancy, cutting off a generous slice. "Good heavens—there's the door-bell, Mother!" She stopped, knife in hand and listened, petrified. "Who on earth can be coming here at this time of night, and all of us in our dressing-gowns. Alma, you're the most nearly dressed of all of us. Here, pin up your hair. There it goes again. Fly!"

Alma seized a handful of hairpins, and thrusting them into her hair as she went, ran out of the room.

Nancy and her mother listened with eyebrows raised.

"Must be a letter or something," Nancy surmised. "You don't suppose—it couldn't be ——"

Alma forestalled her conjectures, whatever they might have been, by entering the room with her face shining and an opened letter in her hand.

"It's an *invitation,* Nancy," she beamed. "Isn't that exciting? Elise Porterbridge wants us to come to a 'little dance she's giving next Friday night.' And the chauffeur is waiting for an answer."

"Funny she was in such a hurry," remarked Nancy. "I suppose someone fell out, and she's trying to get her list made up. What do you think, Mother?"

"Why, it's delightful. I want you to know Elise better anyway. You know her aunt married the Prince Brognelotti, and she will probably do everything for that girl when she makes her début." Mrs. Prescott rustled over to the writing-table and despatched a note in her flowing, pointed hand.

"Hush, Mamma, the chauffeur will hear you," cautioned Nancy with a slight frown. It always pricked her when Alma or her mother said snobbish

little things, and roused her democratic pride—the stiffest pride in the world.

"A dance," carolled Alma, when the door had slammed again behind the emissary of the Porterbridge heiress. "A real, sure enough dance!" She seized Nancy by the waist and whirled her about; then suddenly she stopped so abruptly that Nancy bumped hard against the table. Alma's face was sober, as the great feminine wail rose to her lips:

"I haven't a thing to wear!"

"You must get something, then," said Mrs. Prescott, positively, as if it were the simplest thing in the world. "I want you to look lovely, Alma. It's dreadful to think of a girl with your beauty not being able to appear at your best all the time." Mrs. Prescott had a habit of speaking to Alma as if she were a petted débutante of nineteen, instead of just a pretty, care-free youngster of sixteen. She looked at Nancy, who was the treasurer of the family, much as an impecunious queen might look at her first Lord of the Exchequer while asking him for funds to buy a new crown.

"Why can't you wear your blue crepe," was Nancy's unfeeling answer. "It's very becoming, and you've hardly worn it."

"If you call that an evening dress," Alma cried, on the verge of tears, "you've a vivid imagination

—that's all I've got to say. I just won't go if I have to look dowdy and home-made. I wouldn't have any kind of a time—you know that ——"

"You could cut out the neck and sleeves, and get a new girdle. I'm going to do that to my yellow, and with a few flowers—there'll be some lovely cosmos in the garden—it'll look very nice. And you're sure to have a good time, no matter what you wear, Alma."

"Oh, she can't go if her clothes aren't just right, Nancy—that's all there is to it," said Mrs. Prescott.

"Clothes," declared Alma, her voice quavering between tears and indignation, "are the most important things in the world. It doesn't matter *how* pretty a girl is—if her dress is dowdy, no one will notice her."

"And you must remember, Nancy, that she will be compared with girls who will be sure to be wearing the freshest, smartest and daintiest things," added Mrs. Prescott. Nancy began to laugh. They argued with her as if she were some stingy old master of the house instead of a slip of a girl of seventeen. But there was some truth in what Alma had said, and Nancy knew what agonies would torment her if she felt that she fell a whit below any girl at the dance in point of dress. Nancy could sympathize with her there—only it was quite out of the question that *both* she and

Alma should have new dresses. She thought hard a moment. There was not very much left in the family budget to carry them through the remainder of the month—but then she might let the grocer's and butcher's bills run over, or, better still, she might charge at one of the city department stores where the Prescotts still kept an account. It would be too bad if Alma's first dance should be spoiled, even if the couch did go in its shabby plush for another month or so. Five yards of silk would come to about fifteen dollars—new slippers not less than seven, silk stockings, two—that made twenty-four dollars—thirty to give a margin for odds and ends like lining and trimming. Alma would need a pretty evening dress when she went off to school, and she might as well have it now.

"Well, listen, you poor old darling," she said slowly. "To-day's Saturday. If we trot in town on Monday and get the material, we could easily make up a pretty dress for you to wear on Friday night. Let's see ——"

"She could have a pale blue taffeta," Mrs. Prescott suggested, who was in her element when the subject turned to the matter of clothes, "made perfectly plain—with a broad girdle—or you could have a girdle and shoulder-knots of silver ribbon—and wear silver slippers with it. It would be dear with a round neck, and tiny little sleeves, and a

short, bouffant skirt. You could wear my old rose-colored evening wrap,—it's still in perfect condition."

"That would be *scrumptious!*" shrieked Alma, flinging her arms about them both. "You two are angelic *dumplings*, that's what you are."

"Monday morning, then," said Nancy. "We'd better take an early train."

When her mother and sister had gone to bed, she took out her little account book and began to figure, then all at once she flung the pencil down in disgust at herself.

"Alma's right. I'm turning into a regular old miser. I'm not going to bother—I'm not going to bother. But — but somebody's *got* to." She frowned, staring at the small old-fashioned picture of her father, which smiled gaily at her from the top of the desk. "You left that little job to me, didn't you?" she said aloud, and the memory of some words her father had once spoken to her laughingly came back to her mind—"You're my eldest son, Nancy—mind you take care of the women."

"Only I'm jolly well sick of being a boy, Daddy," she said, as she jumped into bed. "I'll let the first person who steps forward take the job."

CHAPTER III

A MODERN CINDERELLA

"LET'S take a cab to the station. The roads are awfully wet still, and I'll ruin my shoes," suggested Alma. The little family were at breakfast, Nancy and Alma hastily swallowing their coffee so that they could hurry off to the station. After the fit of autumn wind and rain, another summer day had come, with a glistening sunlight which was doing its best to cheer up the drooping flowers in the tiny garden.

"We don't need a cab. What are you talking about?" replied Nancy, glancing out of the window. "It's a wonderful day, and we don't have to make for all the puddles on the way to the station like ducks. By the way, don't let me forget to stop at the bank. I dare say I ought to take some money with me in case we can't get just what we want at Frelinghuysen's. How much do you think we should have, Mother?"

"Seventy-five dollars ought to be enough," said Mrs. Prescott vaguely, after a moment's calculation. Nancy whooped.

"Seventy-five! Good gracious—why, if I spend

a cent over forty, we'll have to live on bread and water for the rest of the month!"

"Well, just as you think, dear—you know best, of course," Mrs. Prescott answered absently. "You two had better be starting. I wish you would get Alma a new hat while you're in town, Nancy. I don't quite like that one she has—it doesn't go with her suit."

Nancy pushed her chair back from the table.

"I'll trot out and see Hannah a moment. We have about thirty-five minutes, Alma."

It took them twenty minutes to walk to the station. Alma was in high spirits, Nancy still thoughtful. But the wind was up and out, tossing the trees, rippling the puddles, which reflected a clear, sparkling sky, and the riotous, care-free mood of the morning was infectious.

As the train sped through the open country, passing stretches of yellowing fields, clusters of woodland and busy little villages, Alma chattered joyously:

"Aren't you awfully glad about the party, Nancy? Don't you think we can go to a matinée—it's such a deliciously idle, luxurious sort of thing to do! I'm going to have chicken patties for luncheon, and lots of that scrumptious chocolate ice-cream that's almost black. Don't you love restaurant food, Nancy? It's such fun to sit and watch

the people, and wonder what they are going to do after luncheon, and what they are saying to each other, and where they live. When I'm married I shall certainly live in town, and I'll have a box at the opera, and I'll carry a pair of those eye-glasses on jewelled sticks—what-do-you-call-'ems—and every morning I'll go down-town in my car and shop, and then I'll meet my husband for luncheon at Sherry's or the Plaza."

"Of course you'll have a country-place on Long Island," suggested Nancy, with good-natured irony, which Alma took quite seriously.

"Oh, yes. With terraces and Italian gardens. I *would* love to be seen standing in a beautiful garden, with broad marble steps, and rows of poplar trees, and a sun-dial ——"

"For whose benefit?"

"Oh, my own."

"We're feeling rich to-day, aren't we?"

"Well, I don't know anything that feels better than to be going to buy a new dress. Shall we get the hat too, Nancy?"

"What do you think?"

Alma hesitated.

"Well, I suppose we'd better wait. It's funny how when you start spending money at all you want to get everything under the sun. Of course, girls like Elise or Jane *do* get everything they want——"

"Exactly. And when you're with them you feel that you must let go, too. And if you can't afford it——" Nancy shrugged her shoulders, and Alma finished for her:

"It makes you miserable."

"Or else," said Nancy, with a curl of the lip, "or else, if you aren't bothered with any too much pride, you'll do what that Margot Cunningham does. She simply camps on the Porterbridges. Elise is so good-natured that she lets Margot buy everything she likes and charge it to her, and Margot finds life so comfy there that she can't tear herself away. I'd rather work my fingers to the bone than take so much as a pair of gloves given to me out of good-natured charity!" Nancy's eyes sparkled. Alma was silent. There were times when Nancy's fierce, stubborn pride frightened her—sometimes the way her sister's lips folded together, and her small, cleft chin was lifted, made her fancy that there might be a resemblance between Nancy and old Mr. Prescott. Alma was the butterfly, and Nancy the bee; the butterfly no doubt wonders why the bee so busily stores away the honey won by thrift and industry, and, in all probability, the bee reads many a lesson to the gay-winged idler who clings to the sunny flower. But to-day the bee relented.

"Now, ma'am, consider yourself the owner of

unlimited wealth," said Nancy, as they swung briskly into the concourse of the Grand Central Station. "You're a regular Cinderella, and *I'm* your godmother, who is going to perform the stupendously brilliant, mystifying act of turning twenty rolls of sitting-room wall-paper, and three coats of brown paint into—five yards of superb silk, two silver slippers, two silk stockings, and three yards of silver ribbon; or, one simple country maiden into a fashionable miss of entrancing beauty."

"Nancy, you're the most angelic person!" squealed Alma. "But aren't you going to get yourself something, too? It makes me feel awfully mean to get new things when you have to wear that dowdy old yellow thing."

"Dowdy, indeed. It's grand. 'Miss Nancy Prescott was charming in a simple gown of mousseline-de-soie, which hung in the straight lines now so much in vogue. Her only ornaments were a bouquet of rare flowers, contrasting exquisitely with the shade of her frock,—a toilette of unusual chic. Miss Alma Prescott, Melbrook's noted beauty, was superb in a lavish creation'—You're going to be awfully lavish, and quite the belle of the ball."

"You ought to have some new slippers, Nancy—a pair of gold ones would absolutely *make* your dress."

"My black ones are all right. I'll put fresh bows on them," said Nancy, firm as a Trojan outwardly, though within her resolution wavered. Dared she take another seven dollars? She began to feel reckless.

"Are you waited on, madam?" The smooth voice of a saleswoman roused her from her calculations.

"We want to see some blue taffeta—not awfully expensive."

"Step this way. We have something exquisite —five dollars a yard."

"Oh, haven't you anything less than that?" stammered Nancy in dismay. Alma glanced at her reprovingly.

"For heaven's sake, don't sound as if you hadn't a dollar to your name, or she'll just right-about-face and walk off," she whispered. "We'll *look* at the expensive silk, and then work around to the cheaper —explain that it's more what we want, and so on."

"Yes, and the cheaper silk will look so impossible after we've seen the other that we'll be taking it," returned Nancy. "*I* know their wiles."

"Here is a beautiful material—quite new," lured the saleswoman. "A wonderful shade. It will be impossible to duplicate. See how it falls—as softly and gracefully as satin, but with more body to it. The other is much stiffer."

"How—how much is it?" asked Nancy feebly.

"Five-ninety-eight. It's special, of course. Later on the regular price will be six-fifty."

"Isn't it *lovely?*" breathed Alma, touching the gleaming stuff with careful fingers.

"Have—have you anything for about three dollars a yard?" asked Nancy, wishing that Alma would do the haggling sometimes.

The saleswoman listlessly unrolled a yard or two from another bolt and held it up.

"Is it for yourself, madam? Or for the other young lady?"

"It's for my sister. Let me hold this against your hair, Alma."

"It's not nearly so nice as the other, of course," observed Alma, in a casual tone. "It's awfully stiff, and the color's sort of washed out. I really think ——"

"Oh, of course, this paler shade is not nearly so effective at night," agreed the saleswoman, pouncing keenly upon her prey. "See how beautifully this deeper color brings out the gold in the young lady's hair. Would you like to take it to the mirror, miss?"

"Oh, don't, Alma!" begged Nancy, in comical despair. "Of course there isn't any comparison." She felt herself weakening. "I—I suppose this would really wear better too."

"Of course it would," said Alma, quickly. "That other stuff is so stiff it would split in no time."

Five times five-ninety-eight — thirty dollars. Nancy wrinkled her forehead, but she knew that she had succumbed even before she announced her surrender. The saleswoman, watching her, lynx-eyed, smiled. Alma preened herself in front of the long mirror, frankly admiring herself, with the soft, silken stuff draped around her shoulders.

"All right," said Nancy. "Give me five yards."

"Charged?" purred the saleswoman. But Nancy had no mind to have the gray ghost of her extravagance revisit her on the first of the month.

"No, no! I'll pay for it, and take it with me." She counted out her little roll of bills, trying not to notice the pitiable way in which her purse shrank in, like the cheeks of a hungry man.

"Is there nothing you would like for yourself, madam?" murmured the voice of the temptress. "Here is some ravishing charmeuse—the true ashes-of-roses. With your dark hair and eyes——"

"Oh, no—no, thanks." Nancy clutched Alma, and turned her head away from the shimmering, pearl-tinted fabric. For all her stiff level-headedness, she was only human, and a girl with a healthy, ardent longing for beautiful finery; prudent she was, but prudence soon reaches its limits when the

pressure of feminine vanity and exquisite luxury is brought to bear upon it. There was only one course of resistance. Nancy fled.

"Now, slippers." Alma skipped along beside her, hugging her precious bundles, with shining eyes, and cheeks aglow. "I think I love slippers better than anything in the world. Nancy, you're a perfect *lamb*."

They tried on slippers. Certainly Alma's tiny foot and slender ankle was a delightful object to contemplate as she turned it this way and that before the little mirror.

"If you had a little buckle, miss—we have some very new rhinestone ornaments—I'd like to show you one—a butterfly set in a fan of silver lace. Just a moment."

Before Nancy could stop her the saleswoman had gone.

"We won't get the buckles, you dear old thing," Alma said consolingly, bending the sole of her foot. "We'll just look at them."

Nancy smiled wryly.

"I'd *like* to get you everything in the shop—I hate to be stingy with you, dear; it's just this old thing," and she held up the shabby purse.

"*Isn't* that perfectly gorgeous?" shrieked Alma, as the saleswoman held a little jewelled dragon-fly, poised on a spray of silver lace, against her instep.

"Gorgeous," echoed Nancy.

"It's a very chic trimming—of course we use it only on the handsomer slippers," chanted the saleswoman. "Now, we could put that on for you in five minutes, and really the expense would be small, considering that nothing more would be needed as an ornament, and it would be the smartest thing to wear—no trimming on the dress whatever."

"How much would it be?" asked Alma. "I—I can't take it now, but later ——"

"The buckles are five dollars, and with the lace fan it would come to seven. I would advise you—the prices will go up in another month ——"

"Well, Alma ——" Nancy hesitated, made one last frantic grasp at her fleeting prudence and surrendered. "Fourteen dollars. All right. You can take the buckles as a Christmas present from me. I'll pay for those, and we'll be back for them after we've got some other things."

"Nancy, you angel! You lamb! You duck! You angelic dumpling!" crowed Alma. "I never felt so absolutely luxurious in all my life."

"I don't imagine you ever did," remarked Nancy; she was aghast at her own extravagance. She judged herself harshly as the victim of the failing which she had so long combatted in her mother and sister. Every atom of the prudence with which she had armed herself seemed to be melting away

like wax before a furnace. She had already spent forty-four dollars, and there was still the silver ribbon to be bought, which would bring the sum up to forty-five at the very least. She had originally intended to buy one or two small items with which to freshen up her own dress for the dance, but she stubbornly put aside the idea.

"Nancy, darling, aren't you going to get yourself some slippers?"

"No—I don't need them. The ones I have are quite good."

"I feel so mean, Nancy. Do you think I'm horribly selfish?"

"Selfish! You aren't the least bit selfish, dear. I can understand perfectly how you hate to go among all those rich girls without looking as well-dressed as any of them, when you're a thousand times prettier than the nicest looking one of them. Besides, just this once——" She paused, realizing that it was not a case of "just this once" at all. Pretty, new clothes and pocket money would be the barest necessities when they should be at Miss Leland's. Why didn't her mother see the folly of sending them to a place where they would learn to want things, actually to need things, far beyond the reach of their little bank account, and where Alma, chumming with girls who had everything that feminine fancy could desire, would either be made mis-

erable, or—she tried to rout her own practical thoughts. Why was it that she was so unwilling to trust in rosy chance? Why was it always she who had to bring the wet blanket of harsh common sense to dampen her mother's and sister's debonair trust in a smiling Providence? Was she wrong after all? She considered the lilies of the field, but somehow she could not believe that their example was the wisest one for impecunious human beings to follow. Lilies could live on sun and dew, and they had nothing to do but wave in the wind.

"Oh, look, Nancy—aren't those feather fans exquisite ——"

"Alma, don't you dare to peep at another showcase in this store, or I'll tie my handkerchief over your eyes and lead you out blindfolded like a horse out of a fire."

"But *do* look at those darling little bottles of perfume. They're straight from Paris. I can tell from those adorable boxes with the orange silk tassels. Wouldn't you give anything on earth to have one? When I'm rich I'm going to have dozens of bottles—those slender crystal ones with enamel tops; and they'll stand in a row across the top of a Louis XVI dressing-table." Nancy smiled at Alma's ever-recurring phrase, "When I'm rich." She wondered if her butterfly sister had formed any

clear notions of how that beatific state was to be realized.

"Alma Prescott, there's the door, and thank heaven for it. Have the goodness, ma'am, to go directly through it. The street is immediately beyond, and that is the safest place for us two little wanderers at present."

Forty-five dollars for just one evening's fun.

Gold slippers would have been just the thing to wear with her yellow dress; but—well ——

CHAPTER IV

LADIES OF FASHION

THE little bedroom which Alma and Nancy shared together wore a gaily topsy-turvy appearance on that memorable night—quite as if it had succumbed to the mood of flighty joy which was in the air. The dresser, usually a very model of good order—except when Alma had been rummaging about it unchecked—was strewn with hairpins, manicuring implements, snips of ribbon and the stems of fresh flowers; all the drawers were partly open, projecting at unequal distances, and giving glimpses of the girls' simple underwear, which had been ruthlessly overturned in frantic scramblings for such finery as they possessed. A fresh, slightly scented haze of powder drifted up as Nancy briskly dusted her arms and shoulders, and then earnestly performed the same attentions for Alma. Mrs. Prescott sat on the edge of the bed, alive with interest in the primping, and taking as keen a delight in her daughters' ball-going as she had done in her own preparations for conquest twenty years before. As critical as a Parisian modiste, she cocked her

pretty head on one side and surveyed the girls with an expression of alertness mingled with satisfaction—such as you might see on the face of a clever business man who watches the promising development of a smart plan, with elation, though not without an eye ready to detect the slightest hitch.

Unquestionably she was justified in pinning the highest hopes on Alma's eventual success in life—if sheer exquisite prettiness can be a safe guarantee for such. Alma, who had plainly fallen in love with herself, minced this way and that before the glass, blissfully conscious of her mother's and sister's unveiled delight in her beauty. Her yellow hair, bright as gold itself spun into an aura of hazy filaments, was piled up on top of her head, so that curls escaped against the white, baby-like nape of her neck. Her dress was truly a masterpiece, and if there had been a tinge of envy in Nancy's nature she might have regretted the skill with which she herself had succeeded in setting off Alma's prettiness, until her own good looks were pale, almost insignificant, beside it. But Nancy was almost singularly devoid of envy and could look with the bright, impersonal eyes of a beauty-lover at Alma's distracting pink and white cheeks, at her blue eyes, which looked black in the gas-light, and at her round white neck and arms—the dress left arms and shoulders bare except for the impudent, short

puffed sleeves which dropped low on the shoulder like those of an early Victorian beauty; anything but Victorian, however, was the brief, bouffant skirt, which showed the slim ankles and the little, arched feet, in their handsome slippers.

"You're perfectly—gorgeous, Alma. You've a legitimate right to be charmed with yourself," said Nancy, sitting down on the bed beside her mother to enjoy Alma's frank struttings and posings.

"I *am* nice," agreed Alma naïvely, trying to suppress a smile of self-approval which, nevertheless, quirked the corners of her lips. "*You* did it, though, Nancy darling. I don't forget that, even if I do seem to be a conceited little thing." She danced over and kissed Nancy's cheek lightly, her frock enchanting her with its crisp rustlings as she did so. "Nancy, you *will* get something nice, too, —the next time?"

"You should have made up a new dress for tonight, anyhow, Nancy," said Mrs. Prescott, turning to inspect Nancy's appearance from the top of her head to the toes of her freshly ribboned slippers. Nancy colored slightly. It had not been a very easy task to overcome the temptation to "blow herself," as Alma would have debonairly expressed a foolish extravagance; and it was not particularly soothing to have that feat of economy found fault with.

"If—if you think I look too dowdy, I—I'll stay at home, Mother," she said, in a quiet tone that betrayed a touch of hurt pride. "You know it was out of the question for me to get another dress, and if you feel sensitive about my going to people like the Porterbridges in what I've got, why, it's absurd to attempt it at all."

Mrs. Prescott was abashed; then in her quick, sweet, impulsive way—so like that of a thoughtless, lovable little girl—she put her arms around Nancy's straight young shoulders.

"Don't be cross with me, darling. I only said that because it hurts me to think that you have to deny yourself anything in the world. You are so sweet, and so strong, and—and I love you so, my dear, that I cannot bear to think of your having to deny yourself the pretty things that are given to the daughters of so many other women."

Instantly Nancy unbent, and, turning her head so that she could kiss her mother's soft hair, she whispered, with a tender little laugh:

"Before you begin pitying us, dearest, you can—can just remember that other women's daughters haven't been given—a mother like you." And then, because, just like a boy, she felt embarrassed at her own emotion, and the tears that had gathered in her eyes, she said briskly:

"If anyone should ask me my candid opinion, I'd

say that I'm rather pleased with myself—only some inner voice tells me that I'm not completely hooked. Here, Mother ——" By means of an excruciating contortion she managed to indicate a small gap in the back of her dress just between the shoulder blades.

"You do look awfully nice, Nancy," commented Alma; she paused reflectively a moment, and then added, "You know, I suppose that at first glance most people would say I was—was the prettier, you know—because I'm sort of doll-baby-looking, and pink and white, like a French bonbon; but an artist would think that you were really beautiful—I hit people in the eye, like a magazine cover, but you grow on them slowly like a—a Rembrandt or something."

"Whew! We've certainly been throwing each other bouquets broadcast to-night," laughed Nancy, who was tremendously pleased, nevertheless. "You'd better put your cloak on, Alma, and stop turning my head around backwards with your unblushing flattery. Isn't that our coach now?"

The sound of wheels on the wet gravel and the shambling cloppity-clop of horses' hoofs, had indeed announced the arrival of the "coach."

"Darn it, that idiotic Peterson has sent us the most decrepit old nag in his stable," remarked Alma, looking out of the window as she slid her

bare arms into the satin-lined sleeves of her wrap. "I think he calls her 'Dorothea,' which means the 'Gift of God.'"

"She looks like an X-ray picture of a baby dinosaur. I hope to heaven she won't fall to pieces before we get within walking distance of the Porterbridges'," said Nancy. "I think that so-called carriage she has attached to her must be the original chariot Pharaoh used when he drove after the Israelites."

In a gay mood, the two sisters climbed into the ancient coupé, which smelt strongly of damp hay, and jounced away behind the erratic Dorothea, who started off at a mad gallop and then settled abruptly into her characteristic amble.

A light, gentle, steady rain pattered against the windows, which chattered like the teeth of an old beggar on a wintry day. The two girls, deliciously nervous, would burst into irrepressible giggles each time when, as they passed a street lamp, the ridiculously elongated shadow of Dorothea and the chariot scurried noiselessly ahead of them and was swallowed up in a stretch of darkness.

"My dear, I'm scared *pink!*" breathed Alma, pinching Nancy's arm in a nervous spasm. "My tummy feels just as if I were going down in an awfully quick elevator."

"I don't see what *you* are scared about," replied

Nancy. "*I* almost wish this regal conveyance of ours *would* break down."

"It feels as if one of the wheels were coming off."

"I guess they are all coming off; but it's been like that since the dark ages already, and I dare say it will last another century or so."

"Look! There's Uncle Thomas' house, now. Doesn't it look exactly like something that Poe would write about? That one light burning in the tower window, with all the rest of the house just a huge black shape, is positively gruesome."

The two girls peered through the dirty little mica oval behind them at the strange old mansion, the bizarre turrets of which were silhouetted against the sky, where the edges of the dark clouds had parted, and the horizon shone with a paler, sickly light.

"It *is* eerie looking. I suppose old Uncle T. is up in that room poring away over his books, and the last thing he'd be thinking of is his two charming nieces bouncing off to an evening of giddy pleasure in this antique mail-cart, or whatever it is."

"Oh, my dear!" Alma squealed faintly. "We're getting there! Oh, look at all the automobiles. We can't go in in this dreadful looking thing."

"All right. You can get out and walk. I say, do your hands feel like damp putty?"

"*Do* they! I feel as if I were getting the measles. Oh, here we are, Nancy!" Alma's tone would have suggested that they had reached the steps of the guillotine. Dorothea, alone, was unmoved, and almost unmoving. With her poor old head dangling between her knees, she crawled slowly along the broad, well-lighted driveway of a very new and very imposing house, beset fore and aft by a train of honking and rumbling motors. Nancy burst into a little breathy quaver of hysterical laughter.

"We must try to be more like Dorothea," she giggled. "Her beautiful composure is due either to an aristocratic pedigree or to her knowledge that she is going to die soon, and all this is the vanity of a world which passes."

In spite of their inner agony of shyness, however, the two girls descended from the absurd old carriage at the broad steps, and reached the door, under the footmen's umbrellas, with every outward appearance of well-bred *sang-froid.*

"I'm so glad you could come, Nancy. Alma, how lovely you look. Don't you want to go upstairs and take off your wraps?" Elise Porterbridge, a tall, fat girl, dressed in vivid green, greeted them; and, with all the dexterity of a matronly hostess, passed them on into the chattering mob of youths and girls which crowded the wide, brightly lighted hall. Alma clutched Nancy's arm fran-

tically as they squeezed their way through to the stairs.

"Did you see a living soul that you knew besides Elise?" whispered Alma as they slipped off their wraps into the hands of the little maid. "Oh, it would be too awful to be a wall-flower after I've gone and gotten these lovely slippers and everything."

"Don't be a goose. This is a good time—don't you know one when you see it? Here, pinch your cheeks a little, and stop looking as if you were going to have a chill. You're the prettiest girl here, and that ought to give you some courage."

While Nancy poked her dress and tucked in a stray wisp of hair, Alma stood eyeing the modish, self-assured young ladies who primped and chattered before the long mirrors around them, with the round solemn gaze of a hostile baby. How could they be so cool, so absolutely self-contained?

"Come on,—you look all right," said Nancy aloud, and Alma marvelled at the skill with which her sister imitated that very coolness and indifference. If she had known it, Nancy was inwardly quaking with the nervous dread that attacks every young girl at her first big party like a violent stage fright.

They made their way slowly down the broad stairs, passing still more pretty, chattering debonair

girls who were calling laughing, friendly greeting to the young men below.

From one of the other rooms a small orchestra throbbed beneath the hum of voices; the scent of half a dozen French perfumes mingled and rose on the hot air; and the brilliant colors of girls' dresses stirred and wove in and out like the changing bits of glass in a kaleidoscope.

"Er—I say—good-evening, Miss Prescott. I got to you first, so I've a right to the first dance." It was Frank Barrows, the hero of Alma's potato adventure, who claimed Alma before her little silver foot had reached the last step. A lean young man, with sleek, blond hair, a weak chin, and the free-and-easy, all-conquering manner of a youth who has been spoiled by girls ever since he put on long trousers and learned to run his own car, he looked at Alma with that look of startled admiration which to a young girl is a sweeter flattery than any that words can frame. She looked up at Nancy with a glance of joyous, innocent triumph, and then, putting her plump little hand on her partner's arm, and instantly meeting his gallantry with the pretty, utterly unconscious coquetry of a born flirt, she moved off.

Nancy, still standing at the foot of the stairs, watched the yellow head as it passed among the heads of the other dancers. That quick, happy

glance of Alma's had said, "Forgive me for being so pretty. You are better, and finer, and more beautiful—but they haven't found it out yet."

She stood alone, terribly shy, her smooth cheeks flushing scarlet, and her bright eyes searching timidly for some friendly corner where she could run and hide herself away for the rest of the evening. Without Alma beside her to be petted and protected, she looked almost pathetically just what she was—a modest young girl, who was peculiarly lovely and appealing, as she stood waiting with a beating heart to catch a friendly eye in all that terrible, gay, selfish throng of pleasure-seekers.

CHAPTER V

A RETICENT GENTLEMAN—AND MISS BANCROFT

With only the one aim of getting to harbor by hook or crook, Nancy, her cheeks burning with shyness, edged her way along the wall. She would not have felt half so much alone if she had been dropped into the middle of the Sahara desert, and, while her little feet tingled with the rhythm of the music, she surrendered herself to the unhappy conviction that she was doomed to be a wall-flower.

She did not know these people; she felt as if she could never know them. Everything in their manner, their speech and their dress suggested a foreignness to her own nature that could never be bridged, unless she herself changed and became another being. It was something that she could not define, this difference; it was simply something that grew out of a different way of thinking and feeling about life. All these people seemed to make pleasure their business, the most important purpose of their existence, and this attitude, expressed in the very way that the girls carried themselves, in the tones of their voices, in their light scraps of incon-

sequential and not very clever talk, made her feel strange beyond description.

She stood near a group of palms under the arch of the staircase, watching the faces all about her, longing one minute to be at home, curled up with a book on her shabby, comfortable window-seat, and the next, that she might be drawn into the centre of all that bubbling, companionable enjoyment. Now she caught a glimpse of Alma, who was standing near the door of the dancing-room, bantering and coquetting with a little cluster of youths who had gathered about her, heaven knows where from or how, like flies about a jar of new honey; it was plainly Alma's natural environment, in which she revelled like a joyous young fish in a sunny pool.

"So that pretty little creature is George Prescott's daughter?" The question, spoken in a rather deep and penetrating voice, carried clearly to Nancy's ears, and she turned. At a little distance from her, seated on a small couch, sat Mrs. Porterbridge, a lean woman with a tight-lipped, aquiline face, and painfully thin neck and arms, and the old lady who had put the question. A quite remarkable-looking old lady, Nancy thought, enormously fat, dressed in purple velvet, her huge, dimpled arms and shoulders billowing out of it, like the whipped cream on top of some titanic confection. Two small, plump, tapering hands clasped a hand-

some feather fan against her almost perpendicular lap. Two generous chins completely obliterated any outward evidences of neck, so that her head seemed to have been set upon her shoulders with the naïve simplicity of a dough-man's; yet for all this, one glance at her keen, intelligent face, with its sleepy, twinkling eyes and humorous, witty mouth, was enough to assure one that, whoever she might be, she was not an ordinary old lady by any means. One guessed at once that she had seen much of the world in her sixty-five or seventy years, that she had enjoyed every moment of the entertainment, and that while she probably required everyone else to respect public opinion, she felt comfortably privileged to disregard it herself whenever she pleased. She had been busily discussing everyone who attracted her attention, disdaining to lower her sonorous voice or to conceal in any way the fact that she was gossiping briskly. Young and old alike hastened up to her to pay their respects, and it was evident from their manner of eager deference that she was a rather important old person, whose keen and fearless tongue made her good opinion worth gaining.

At present she had centred her lively interest upon Alma, and Nancy could not resist the temptation of listening to her remarks, especially since the old lady was obviously perfectly willing to let any-

one and everyone hear her who might have reason to listen.

"That is little Alma Prescott," Mrs. Porterbridge was replying. "She is charmingly pretty, isn't she?"

"The image of her mother. Tell me something about them. It's ridiculous, isn't it, how we can live for years within a stone's throw of our neighbors without ever knowing whether their Sunday clothes are made of silk or calico. George Prescott used to be my particular favorite, when he was a youngster. I remember when he married that empty-pated little beauty—I gave him tons of my choicest advice—was absolutely prodigal of my finest gems of wisdom; but when I saw her—well, I knew very well that there would be ups and downs—she should have married an Indian nabob—but, thought I, I might as well shout to the north wind to be placid as to tell him to give her up and find himself some sensible, excellent creature, who could mend his socks and turn his old suits for him. He would rather have lived on burnt potatoes and bacon, with that charming little spendthrift, than have enjoyed all the blessings of good housekeeping at the hands of the most estimable creature we could have found for him. I do like that spirit in a young man, however much my excellent common sense may disapprove of it.

"I saw nothing of George after his marriage. I was too fond of him to stand around offering advice, when he couldn't possibly make any use of it. I should probably have lost my temper just as Tom Prescott did—and I cannot endure to be in such a ridiculous position. I had a notion that Lallie Prescott didn't live here any more."

"I believe that the family suffers rather keen financial difficulties," said Mrs. Porterbridge. "The girls go out very little—are quite isolated, in fact."

"You mean that they are hard up—don't use those genteel euphemisms, my dear,—I can't understand 'em.

"I'm sorry. It was inevitable, of course, but I'm one of the few beings that sincerely regret seeing other people reaping what they've sown. I've always avoided my own deserts so successfully." Her big, jolly laugh rang out at this. "There are two girls, I remember. Both pretty?"

"Yes, indeed," replied Mrs. Porterbridge, in the unenthusiastic tone with which the mother of a rather plain daughter will praise the beauty of another woman's daughter.

"Hum. Well, that's distinctly *something*. I really couldn't work up any heartfelt interest in them if they were ugly—though, of course, I understand that beauty is only skin deep, and hand-

some is as handsome does, and all that—whoever invented those saws must have been unbearably ugly—I've always suspected that it was some plain, jealous old wife of King Solomon who got very philosophical in her old age. Now, I'd really like to know what little Lallie Prescott is going to do with them."

Mrs. Porterbridge gave a dry, affected little laugh, looking at Alma, who was waltzing again with the obviously infatuated Frank Barrows.

"Well, I imagine that she is going to do all that she can to marry them off as advantageously as possible, and I dare say that both of them——"

"Now, don't say anything cattish, my dear," interrupted the old lady, quite sharply, a sudden coldness routing the twinkle in her merry eyes. "I always know when you are going to say something that will annoy me, and nothing annoys me more than to hear an older woman say anything unkind about a young girl. I tell you this because I'm sure that you don't want to make me angry. If you are crying to tell me that Lallie Prescott is a schemer in regard to the future of her two daughters, why, I should be very much surprised to learn anything else. We are all schemers for our children—and just as in love and war, we consider everything fair so long as it works for their advantage. But——"

Nancy, her cheeks burning, heard no more. In a

last desperate effort at escape, she turned and fled unseen through the nearest doorway.

At first she did not realize where she was; then she discovered that she had chanced upon a veritable haven of refuge, a large, quiet room, cosily lighted by a reading-lamp, furnished with huge, paternal-looking armchairs and divans, and lined on three of its walls from floor to ceiling with whole regiments of books. The fourth wall was monopolized by a great stone fireplace, where three or four tree-trunks smouldered softly, popping every now and then into small explosions of ruddy sparks. The smell of leather, of wood smoke, and even the delicate musty smell of the rich, yellowed paper of old books mingled with the hazy fragrance of a Turkish cigarette. Nancy was too much concerned with her own thoughts to wonder where the source of that comfortable aroma of tobacco lay—it was to her just a part of the atmosphere of books and quiet and leather chairs which she always associated with her memories of her father. Revelling in the sensation of being alone, as she blissfully fancied herself to be, she wandered about looking at the titles of the books, now and again taking down a volume and turning the leaves. Here she chanced upon a delightful old edition of "Pickwick Papers," bound in worn leather, there a copy of the "Vicar of Wakefield,"

with yellowed pages, and quaint, old-fashioned print, and the sight of these old friends, associated as they were with the happiest and most tranquil hours of her life, soothed to a certain extent her feelings which had been cruelly wounded by the conversation she had overheard.

But she was still sore and angry. Still holding the "Vicar of Wakefield" in her hand, she stood, staring absently into the fire.

"So that's what people will be saying about us—that we are pushing and scheming, and—and trying to make friends just to use them for our advantage," she thought bitterly, recalling Mrs. Porterbridge's unfriendly little insinuation.

Sensitive and proud as she was, that unfinished remark, made in the cold, hard tone of a woman who, judging the whole world by herself, credited everyone alike with self-interested and worldly motives, had inflicted a wound that would be long in healing. It was not indeed on her own account that she resented it so bitterly, but because of her mother and Alma, whose actions, she knew, could be so misinterpreted and ascribed to quite false motives. She knew, too, less by experience than by instinct, that beneath all the pleasures and gaiety which Alma craved so eagerly, would flow that bitter undercurrent of cynical comment made by people who had so long been self-seeking that they

could not believe in the artlessness of a young girl's simple thirst for enjoyment.

Busy with these thoughts, a little strange and mature perhaps for her age, she was quite unconscious of two interesting facts. First, that from an armchair just beyond the radius of the lamplight, the source of the cigarette smoke was regarding her with mingled astonishment and approval, and, second, that she herself was making a very charming picture as she stood in the deep, mellow glow of the firelight.

A small man, with a kind, whimsical, clever face, was looking at her with a pair of singularly bright brown eyes—eyes which had the direct, unwavering, gentle gaze of a person who has the gift of reading the meaning of faces and expressions to which others are blind. Indeed, so clearly had he guessed the trend of the thoughts which underlay the seriousness of Nancy's sensitive face, that he felt almost like an eavesdropper. Suddenly she jerked her head and saw him. He stood up.

"I—I beg your pardon," he apologized, still with the sensation of having heard something that had not been meant for his ears. "You didn't know I was here, and I was rather at a loss as to how I should break it to you."

Nancy had flushed to the edge of her hair.

"That—that's all right," she stammered. "I—

I mean, I should apologize to you. You were reading." She began to move away toward the door again, but he stopped her hastily.

"You mustn't go, and you mustn't for a moment think you've disturbed me. I haven't any business to be in here anyway, because I think I was invited to entertain and be entertained like any respectable guest. I don't know what they do to unmannerly, unsociable creatures who sneak off for a book and a smoke from the scenes of revelry, but I'm guilty, and deserve to die the death, or whatever it is."

Nancy laughed. When he talked he had a droll way of wrinkling up his forehead, and then suddenly breaking into a beaming, mischievous grin, like a schoolboy.

"I'm guilty, too."

"Yes,—and really ever so much more so than I am; because you're deliberately robbing at least ninety-nine per cent. of the guests of a part of their evening's pleasure, whereas, my absence is of so little importance one way or the other that, although I've been in here the better part of an hour already, there hasn't been even a whimper of protest. It's been decidedly injurious to my *amour-propre*. I had hoped, when you came in, that you had been sent by the unanimous vote of all present to request my immediate return to the regions of

festivity. I was prepared to be coy—but not adamantine. Imagine my chagrin and dismay when it gradually dawned on me not only that you hadn't come for any such flattering purpose, but even that you hadn't the smallest notion I was here. As far as you were concerned I was of less significance than a cockroach."

"But that's not bad—a cockroach would be of awful significance to me," said Nancy, with a laugh.

"We have caught each other red-handed in an overwhelming breach of manners," continued he, severely. "But then, look at it this way—here we are, each having a good time in our own way. Now it seems to me that a hostess could ask no more of a guest than that he find his own entertainment—if he seeks it by ambling out into the garden to weed up wild onions, why, well and good ——"

"You are only trying to dazzle me with a false argument in self-defense," said Nancy.

"You should be grateful to me for furnishing such a good one, since you've need of one yourself, ma'am. But if you don't like it, why then I shall change my mind. As a matter of fact, the idea of dancing has suddenly appealed to me very strongly —since Providence has at last provided me with a —well, with a more delightful partner than I should have dared to hope for. And they are playing a very charming waltz. Will you dance with me?"

He made a graceful little old-fashioned bow, and offered her his arm. Then he smiled.

"I—I haven't introduced myself yet. Do you mind? I should have done it in the beginning, but I couldn't think of any graceful way of hinting at my name, and it's so horribly clumsy just to say pointblank, 'My name's George Arnold. What's yours?'"

"But there isn't any other way," answered Nancy, a little shyly, but laughing, too, "unless we both go to Mrs. Porterbridge and ask her to introduce us. My name is Nancy—Anne Prescott."

"There now—it's perfectly simple, isn't it? I never could understand why there should be any formal to-do about telling two people each other's names. Do you know, the very minute you came in—perhaps it was from the way you looked at those dear old books—I felt as if—well, as if we ought to be friends. You are fond of them, aren't you—of books—really fond of them?"

"I love those old, shabby ones. They—they looked so very friendly."

He stole a keen glance at her face, and smiled gently at what it told him. Then, as she clung to his arm, he guided her dexterously through the crowd to the dancing floor.

After that first dance the whole evening changed for Nancy. She had half doubted that her com-

panion would be a good dancer, but in two moments that doubt was routed. Gliding smoothly, weightlessly as if to the gentle rhythm of a wave, they circled through the moving swarm of dancers; Nancy's cheeks flushing like two poppies and her eyes glistening with the exhilaration of the music. Her timidity had left her; she felt warm, vivacious and attractive, and it seemed perfectly natural that after that first waltz she had partners for every dance.

Mr. Arnold danced with no one else. When other partners claimed her, he retired to the doorway, and stood with his arms folded, surveying the scene with his whimsical, absent-minded smile; but evidently he regarded it as his right to have each waltz with her.

"My aunt has ordered me to present you to her," he said, when he had at length led her into a corner for an ice, and a moment's chat. "For some reason she has evidently taken a great fancy to you at sight, and she is giving me no peace. She is a very peremptory and badly spoiled old lady, but it's impossible to resist her. I told her that she might frighten you to death, and that then you'd blame *me*."

"You *didn't!*" cried Nancy, horrified.

"Indeed I did. I've had the experience before —and I told her that I'd be hanged if I assumed the

responsibility of surrendering any unsuspecting person into her clutches without giving them fair warning. But, seriously, she is a very dear lady, —though an eccentric one—and she has been saying extremely nice things about you. Besides—she asked me to tell you that she knew your father, and that *she* loved him long before *you* were born."

Something in his softened, gentle tone went to Nancy's heart. She put down her ice.

"Will you take me now? I think I know—I mean I've seen your aunt already."

"She is a very remarkable person. She can be more terrifying—and more tender, than any woman in the world. Utterly fearless, something of a tyrant—possibly because she has never been denied anything she wanted in her life. She simply doesn't accept denials. If she had been a man she might have been a Pitt, or a Napoleon. As she is, she is a mixture of Queen Elizabeth—and Queen Victoria."

The amazing individual, described by this brief biographical preface, who was still enthroned on the coquettish little French couch, and who was now consuming a pink ice with naïve relish, was indeed the old lady in purple—otherwise, Miss Elizabeth Bancroft, of Lowry House (for some reason she had always been given this somewhat English style of designation; possibly because she was the

last of her name to be identified with the magnificent collections for which Lowry House, the American roof-tree of aristocratic English colonists, had been famous for more than a hundred years).

As Nancy stood before her, she looked up at the girl keenly, her little blue eyes diminished in size by the thick lenses of her pince-nez. Then she handed her ice to Mr. Arnold without even glancing at him, and held out both her plump white hands to Nancy. Her whole face softened, with the dimpling, comfortable smile of a motherly old nurse.

"Oh, my dear child—if you were only a boy I could believe you were George again—*my* George, your father—not this young rascal. Come, sit down beside me. I shan't keep you long. Have you been having a good time, my dear?"

She was not a terrible old lady at all. On the contrary, with wonderful skill, with cosy, affectionate little ways, with her jolly laugh, and her droll stories, she had succeeded in less time than it takes to tell in completely winning Nancy to her. And somehow, although she appeared to be doing all the talking herself, although she touched so lightly and so adroitly that she hardly seemed to touch at all on any topic that was delicately personal to the girl, she had managed within a brief five minutes to

glean a hundred little facts, which, by piecing together in her keen old mind, gave her more knowledge concerning the Prescotts than another person could have come by in a week's diligent pumping.

"George, my dear ——"

"Yes, Aunt Eliza."

"Oh, nothing. I wish to goodness you were a woman. It just occurred to me that you can't possibly understand what I was going to say to you, so never mind about listening to me. Smoke, if you want to, and let me think in peace."

"Very well." From Mr. Arnold's docile submissiveness it might be surmised that he, too, wanted to think in peace. Miss Bancroft's lumbering, impressive coupé rumbled along over the wet roads toward Lowry House; its two occupants buried in that mood of silence which only two very sympathetic beings know how to respect. Presently Miss Bancroft burst out:

"The child is quite charming. I shall give Tom a good sound piece of my mind. To-morrow."

George Arnold grunted.

"It's only fair sportsmanship to give him twelve hours' warning."

"Poor Lallie Prescott. Like most silly women, she's going to try to beat Providence by pushing them forward into premature rivalry with girls

who have every financial advantage over them, ruin their contentment, so that they will be ready to fling away their happiness on the first little whippersnapper who looks as if he could give them a trip to Paris and a season in Cannes every year. I admire her fighting spirit, but it's hopelessly misdirected."

"Am I meant to understand you, Aunt Eliza?"

"No. Don't even listen to me. Nancy has too much sense for a girl of her age, and that exquisite little Alma has none. Tut-tut. I find that I must interfere."

CHAPTER VI

MISS BANCROFT BEARDS THE OGRE

Miss Bancroft had not made her solemn declaration lightly. She never made any announcements of her intentions without weighty consideration; consequently she was a woman who meant what she said, and meant it thoroughly. Moreover, she never procrastinated; she thought in a straight line, and she acted in a straight line.

Like most women, she took a healthy human delight in "interfering"; but, unlike the majority of her sex, she indulged very rarely. When, however, she had made up her mind on the point of allowing herself to concern herself in other people's business, she experienced the exquisite relish of a strictly self-controlled gamester, who allows himself to play only rarely so that he may enjoy his sport with that peculiar zest which only long abstinence can whet.

On a sunny, warm September day, mellow with the promise of an Indian summer, Miss Bancroft, smart, though rotund, in lavender linen, set out on her pilgrimage to the house of Thomas Prescott.

"I see that you aren't above the traditional wiles

of your sex, Aunt," commented George Arnold, looking up from his book, and surveying her with twinkling eyes, from the long wicker porch chair, where he had been dozing in the sun. "You've rigged yourself out in full panoply. That's a jaunty little parasol you have."

Miss Bancroft, standing on the broad steps, put up her parasol at this, to shade the fine texture of her gaily beflowered straw hat from the sun, and then glanced around at her nephew with a demure smile.

"I make a point of looking my best always when I'm going to see Tom Prescott. Of course he thinks me a sensible woman, a remarkably reasonable woman, and all that nonsense; but I like to leave him with at least a half-formed notion that I'm surprisingly well preserved, even if I have rather lost my waist-line. There was a time, you know ——" the demure smile quirked the corners of her big, mobile mouth, and sparkled impishly in her eyes; then with a little wag of her head, she ran down the steps like a fat, jolly schoolgirl.

George Arnold, leaning back against a chintz cushion, watched the portly, festive figure that moved away under the trees of the long drive. Miss Bancroft usually seemed to roll slowly, but efficiently along on wheels as ponderous and impressive as an old-fashioned stage-coach. He

caught a last glimpse of lavender and white through the shrubs that bordered the end of the lawn. He felt a good deal of interest in this pilgrimage of his aunt's, although he had no very clear idea of the purpose of it. It had something to do with two very pretty young girls whom he had seen at an otherwise stupid dance the night before. One of the girls looked like a Dresden doll, the other had dark eyes, and a direct, shy, almost boyish smile. Her name was Anne—Nancy. Nancy suited her much better. He had thought about her several times. For no particular reason—she was hardly eighteen, and he was, well, he was thirty-three, though that was neither here nor there. It was simply that he liked her rather better than one likes most girls of that age. She had a way of listening to a man without that stupid, flustered expression, as though she was only wondering what in the world she should say when it should be her turn to talk. She liked books. He wondered if she knew that he wrote them. Of course he wasn't world-famous, but it might interest her to know that he was the George Arnold whose collections of exquisitely delicate children's stories had already been translated into six foreign languages, "including the Scandinavian."

He smiled to himself at the naïve vanity which had prompted this thought; and chastised it by tell-

ing himself that it was only too likely that her ignorance or knowledge of what he did or was were matters of like indifference to her.

Meantime, Miss Bancroft, puffing a little under the combined difficulties of avoirdupois and a beaming September sun, was looking with an almost pathetic anticipation at the rich cool shadows beneath which slept the rambling mansion of Thomas Prescott.

"I shall order some tea. A man is always so much more amenable to reason over a tea-table—and for my part, I'll not survive half an hour without a little light refreshment. I suppose I'll have to listen to a long discourse on the origin of the Slavic races or the religious customs of the Aztecs, until I can get him down to argue with me on his duty toward his fellow creatures. I hope to Heaven that his principles are drowsy to-day. I can't bear it if I have to combat a lot of principles. It's absolutely heathenish to have principles in warm weather anyway. Of course they are the proper things to have, but, dear me, they *are* such nuisances. It's all right to have them about yourself, I suppose, but to have them about other people is priggish, and quite useless, so far as I can see. My observation has taught me that if you like a person it makes no difference whether their principles coincide with your own or

not, or even if they have none at all; and if you don't like a person, it's downright irritating to have to approve of them." Miss Bancroft's mental grammar, like much of her spoken grammar, was inaccurate, of course; as in other matters, she held rule to scorn, when the rule interfered with her personal conception of what she was trying to make clear to other people or to herself.

Under the vigorous thrust of her plump, direct forefinger, the door-bell pealed clearly in the cool remote regions of the house. Standing under the arch of the Norman doorway, she surveyed the broad, shade-flecked lawns with interest and a sort of irritable appreciation. Somewhere under the trees a gardener was raking the drive and burning neat piles of warm, brown leaves, from which the pungent smoke ascended in sinuous blue spirals, like languorously dancing phantoms of the dead leaves; and the pleasant, rhythmic sound of the rake on the gravel intensified the sober peaceful silence peculiar to that bachelor's domain.

The door was opened.

"Tell Mr. Prescott that it's Miss Bancroft. Nonsense, I shan't sit down in the drawing-room at all—it makes me feel like a member of the Ladies' Aid come to petition a subscription for a new church carpet or something. Tell Mr. Prescott that I'll be out on the porch."

"Will you come through this way, then, madam?" suggested the old butler, meekly.

Miss Bancroft followed him, sighing a little with relief as the coolness of the great hall, with its smell of old, polished wood and waxed floors, closed about her.

"And, William," she called pathetically after the retreating butler, "do put the kettle on!"

On her way through the house she passed a stately succession of large rooms. A handsome drawing-room, with a polished parquetry floor, fit for the dainty crimson heels of a laced and furbelowed French coquette; its great glass chandelier shrouded in white tarlatan; the dining-room, with high-wainscoted walls, on which hung three or four astonishingly valuable and even beautiful pictures by masters of the eighteenth century English school. For all its impressive grandeur, the long table, covered with a rare piece of Italian brocade, was, with the single carved chair set at the distant end, a barren table, indeed, for a man whom Miss Bancroft knew to be possessed of one of the warmest, tenderest and most affection-craving hearts in the whole world.

"Principles—fiddlesticks!" she observed aloud. "Tst!"

A living-room, in which no one ever lived, a writing-room, in which no one ever wrote, and long

halls, wainscoted in dark oak and quiet as those of a college library, whose silence was never broken by the light staccato footsteps of gay feet, or the murmur of roguish voices. But the air of pathos which all these things wore seemed to rise from the fact that they had been planned and secured not for the enjoyment of a lonely old man, but for some happy purpose that had never been realized. They seemed to wear an expression of disappointment, even of apology for existing so uselessly.

"Tut! How can anyone be patient with a man of principles," again commented Miss Bancroft; but her face had grown a little sad.

She was rocking gently back and forth in the shade of the cool stone porch, when the sound of footsteps at last reached her ears, and she looked up with the warm smile of a guest who knows she is always welcome.

"Elizabeth! This is a very great pleasure. I thought you had forgotten me!"

"You deserve to be forgotten, my dear friend. Ah, now you've disarmed me, though. I've just conscience enough to have to tell you that I've come this time with ulterior motives."

"I can find fault with no motives of yours, so long as they prompt you to visit me. I look forward to my little chats with you as a child looks forward to his Saturday treats."

"My dear Tom, your gift of saying delightful things is one of the wonders of the age. Here you never see a woman from one year's end to the other, and yet you can turn a compliment as charmingly as though you practised on the fairest in the land every evening of your life."

"'In my youth, said the Father ——'" quoted the old gentleman with a twinkle. "However, let's hear your ulterior motives first, my dear Elizabeth, so that afterwards we can chat with unburdened minds."

"No—no, I refuse to beard you until we have some tea. Thank goodness, here's William bringing it now. I took the liberty of ordering it, Tom."

"You took no liberties at all—you merely assumed your privileges. Tut-tut! Tea. You women, with all your notions and your injurious habits—how very delightful it is to be near you!"

"To hear you talk, Tom, how could *anyone* suspect that you were a man of principles!" cried Miss Bancroft. "How could anyone dream that you were hard, and austere and—and unimaginative!" He looked at her in mild astonishment.

He was a small old man, rather delicate in build, with the blunt broad hands of a worker, and a high, smooth, massive forehead, from which his perfectly white hair fell back, long and almost childishly soft

and fine. His eyes, set deep under the sharply defined bone of his projecting brow, wore the gentle, far-away expression noticeable in many near-sighted people; but his chin contradicted their softness, and there was a hint of obstinacy in his close-set mouth and rather long upper lip. He was dressed negligently, and indeed almost shabbily, and he made no apologies for his appearance; since he never gave a thought to it himself, he could not consider what other people might think of it. His greatest hobby, lingering with him from earlier years, was chemistry, and he spent virtually all his time in the laboratory which he had fitted up in one of the odd towers that decorated his house. His coat and trousers would have given a far less observant person than Sherlock Holmes a clue to this favorite occupation of his, stained and burned as they were with acids.

"Do you eat your *dinner* in those clothes?" demanded Miss Bancroft.

"Why? What's the matter with them? Why not eat dinner in 'em? My dear Elizabeth, surely at this late date you haven't taken it into your head to reform my habits?"

"I don't know but that I have," replied Miss Bancroft with a touch of grimness.

"Is that your ulterior motive? I suspected it. Tell me what you meant when you accused me just

now of being hard and austere and unimaginative. Why unimaginative?"

"No really intelligent woman would ever try to explain anything so subtle to a man. I mean that you are unimaginative because you allow yourself to be rigid ——"

"Rigid? Rigid about what?"

"About your principles. I like you, Tom—you know how much. I admire you more than any man I have ever known, and I have known a good many remarkable men. But one thing I cannot forgive you is your principles."

"My principles? When did I ever offend you with principles?"

Miss Bancroft poured herself another cup of tea, and laid a second piece of bread-and-butter neatly on the side of her saucer.

"Come," said Mr. Prescott, with a keen glance at her. "Come, it's not like you, Elizabeth, to beat about the bush. What can this matter be which you find so difficult to broach in plain English?"

Miss Bancroft hesitated a moment. It touched her vanity to be accused of beating about the bush, since she took an especial pride in her reputation of being a woman who never minced matters, and who always made a direct and fearless attack.

Then she said, simply:

"I came to talk to you about—George's daughters, Tom."

There was a short silence.

"It's not like you, Elizabeth, to—to touch upon a matter so very delicate," remarked Mr. Prescott, quietly, his lips tightening slightly. "Of course I can understand how my attitude in regard to them must appear to you, but I fancied that there existed between you and me a silent agreement that this was one subject which was never to be mentioned."

"My dear Tom, you know that under ordinary circumstances I am not an interfering woman; therefore you must realize that I should never have spoken of this to you without the best of reasons for doing so. But I feel that you are allowing certain principles, excellent no doubt in themselves, but wrong in your particular application to them, to thwart your own happiness; to say nothing of depriving others of the advantages which it is in your power to bestow." Miss Bancroft was very serious now. As she spoke she leaned over and laid her fat little hand earnestly on the old man's shabby sleeve. He said nothing, and she continued:

"There are two young girls, charming—beautiful, indeed—the daughters of a man you loved far more even than most fathers love their first-born sons ——"

"Don't!" exclaimed Mr. Prescott, sharply, al-

most fiercely. "Don't speak to me of that, Elizabeth. Can't you realize that just to mention my—George recalls all my old rancor against that little, heartless spendthrift who ruined him—*killed* him——" his voice rose hoarsely, then making an effort to control himself, he went on in a quieter tone:

"It's very difficult for me to discuss this with you, Elizabeth."

"I'm sorry, Tom. But you have no right to—it's a matter of your own happiness as much as theirs—and I would be no friend of yours if I were not willing and anxious to risk your anger for the sake of righting this mistake you are making."

"My nieces are not in want. And familiarity with a certain degree of poverty is the source of a wisdom that safeguards men and women from follies that lead to many of the greatest miseries on earth."

"Want, my dear Tom, is a purely relative condition," said Miss Bancroft. "There are needs, which to certain natures are more intolerable than physical hunger. To deprive a young girl of simple, innocent delights—companionship of her own kind, dainty clothes, harmless enjoyments—is like robbing a plant of sun and rain."

"Do you mean to tell me that poverty need deprive any girl of such things? Nonsense, Elizabeth! I have seen girls who had but two dresses to

their name, who worked and struggled and economized, and who nevertheless had as much pleasure —indeed more, I'll wager—than the most petted heiress in the land. And what's more, they made better wives and better mothers and better citizens. They knew how many cents make a dollar, and how many dollars their men could make in a week by the sweat of their brow, working not eight hours a day, but ten and twelve. One never heard this sickly whine from them—this talk that women must be coddled and pampered, and that men can eat their hearts out to provide the 'sun' in which *they* bask like pet lizards! They didn't ask for 'sunlight'—they asked only that they might work and save with their husbands—that they could be fit partners, and they found their joy, not in 'dainty clothes' and 'harmless enjoyments' but in giving their strength and their courage for their husbands and their children!" Mr. Prescott had risen to his feet in the vehemence of his feeling, and was walking back and forth, his hands locked behind his back, and his head lowered and thrust forward between his hunched-up shoulders.

"Good heavens, I've got him roused for fair," thought Miss Bancroft, with a mixture of amusement and dismay. "And of course, theoretically he's dead right. Now why is it that so many things which, theoretically, are dead right, practically, are

all wrong? That's what I've got to prove to him—and I don't know whether I shall succeed after all. I must take care not to be sentimental—that rouses him dreadfully."

Aloud she said, in a quiet voice:

"Listen, Tom—under ordinary circumstances I should agree with you absolutely. But a short time ago I spoke of want being relative. You said that your nieces are not in want. You meant, of course, that they had food and clothes and shelter. If they were girls who lived in an absolutely different plane of life that would be sufficient for their happiness. They could have pleasure with their two dresses and their one best bonnet, because everyone else of their class would have no more. But take one of them out of that class; put her where her only companions would have to be sought for among men and women who lived on a scale of comparative wealth, where, to make friends, she would have to appear well, and so on—then, what in the first case was at least a sufficiency, now becomes tragically inadequate. There is no cure but for that girl to recede from the class to which by birth, breeding and instinct she belongs.

"You have built up a great fortune. You yourself are what you boast of being—a self-made man—a man originally of the people. But you made your nephew a gentleman—understand that I am

using the word in the commonest sense. Consequently his children belong to a class in which needs must be measured by a different scale from that used for working women. They live—as you do, and most likely because you do—in a very rich community. They suffer from wants that girls of a different class would never know. They are deprived of things which your working girl would not be deprived of. They are poorer on their two thousand a year, or whatever it is, than a peasant woman would be on two hundred, because their particular needs are more expensive."

"They will be very rich—after I die," said Mr. Prescott in a low voice, after a short pause. "But I won't let them even suspect it. That little wife of George's—I never want to see her again—she is a great little gambler. If she felt sure that in a few years her daughters were coming into a fortune of several millions, Heaven only knows but that she'd have the last cent of it spent in advance. You seem to have gleaned an immense amount of information concerning my nieces—perhaps you know what her plans for them are."

"You know, Tom, that I was as much opposed—indeed more opposed, perhaps, than you were to George's marrying Lallie. But that is neither here nor there now. I am afraid that she is—well, attempting things for her girls that lie beyond her

income. You must not blame her. She isn't a wise woman, but I am sure that she is one who suffers more for her mistakes than she causes others to suffer. Of course I am no judge of that.

"She is a little gambler, no doubt, as you said —but a gallant one. She is playing against rather desperate odds—and she cannot be blamed if she plays foolishly. As I understand it, I believe that her object is to give her girls, by hook or crook, advantages that lie beyond her means, the goal being that one of them or both will marry—well. If she wins—well and good ——"

"Well and good—fiddlesticks! Nonsense! Good Heavens!" shouted Mr. Prescott. "Whatever are you driving at, Elizabeth? I can't make head or tail of all this talking. You come to me, telling me that my nieces are in want of some kind or other, that that mother of theirs is living beyond her means in her attempt to put them on a footing with the daughters of millionaires, so that they can marry some mother's son whom they fancy can stand their extravagance, and as far as I can make out, you want me to defray their expenses, so that the business of ruining some other man's boy as mine was ruined will be less difficult for them. Have you gone clean daft?"

"I see I haven't made myself perfectly clear," said Miss Bancroft, patiently. "I should have told

you that I saw both of your nieces last night. It was because of the older one that I came here today—Nancy. She looks enough like George to make your heart ache. And she is facing poor George's problem. She is a very remarkable young girl—I don't cotton to the average young miss very readily, as you know, but there was something in that bright, eager young face that went to my heart. She was at the Porterbridges'. They came in an old hack that they were ashamed of. Do you like to think of George's daughters doing that?

"She is a girl who deserves a fair chance, and she's not getting it. But she isn't the sort that whimpers. She struck me as being full of a fine courage—and an independence of spirit that made one member of the family the very troublesome person he is. She is a girl who has her teeth set against circumstance, and her own cool, sober views of life. But she is very young—too young to have to cope with the difficulties that face her, and far too proud to accept any help with strings tied to it. Remember that. And in my opinion, it is a sin and a shame that you, who could give her the help she needs, and who could get a great deal of happiness in return—you won't even see her. I'm not asking anything but that you see and talk to Nancy sometime." Miss Bancroft rose, and shook out her skirt.

Mr. Prescott stood, looking straight ahead of him, with his under lip thrust forward, a characteristic trick of that same grand-niece Nancy, if he but knew it.

Presently he turned, and held out his hand with a queer, almost shy smile.

"Do forgive me, Elizabeth, for bellowing at you as I have. You know, my dear girl—and you have often agreed with me—that, while at my death my nieces will become very rich, it has been my purpose to allow them to know poverty, with all its sorrows and harassments, so that they can use my fortune wisely for their own happiness and for the happiness of the families that they will have in time. My theory is right—but circumstances alter cases. I shall think over what you have said—but I shall promise nothing."

Miss Bancroft accepted his hand and pressed it affectionately.

"Well, then, good-bye. No, don't bother to open the door for me; I'll go this way."

He smiled at her again as she went down the steps.

"I always feel lonely when you have gone, even when we have been quarrelling," he remarked, with a wistful look.

"Of course you feel lonely. You roll around in that huge house of yours like a hazelnut in a shoe,"

returned Miss Bancroft, quickly. He caught her meaning, and as quickly replied:

"Nonsense—I like plenty of room. Never could bear to have a lot of people hanging around. No man can accomplish anything with an army of women and things hanging to his coat-tails!"

"Tst!" observed Miss Bancroft, and because there was no answer to that, she could retire with the satisfaction of having had the last word.

CHAPTER VII

A MAN OF "PRINCIPLES"

"ONE dozen stockings—six woolen and six silk—imagine owning six pairs of silk stockings—six nighties—don't they look luxurious, all beribboned and fluffy? One thick sweater, one pair of stout boots—I hope these boots are stout enough; they look as if they could kick a hole through the side of a battle-ship. One mackintosh—now where under the sun can I put this mackintosh?"

"Oh, just roll it up in a bundle and slam it in that corner near your shoes. It'll keep 'em from bumping around. My dear, you look as if you'd been in a tornado."

"*In* a tornado! I *am* a tornado." Nancy lifted a flushed face, and gazed at Alma through a haze of tumbled hair. Then she sat back on her heels in front of the open trunk, and seizing her locks near the temples, pulled them frenziedly. "Alma Prescott, if you sit there another moment looking calm, I'll throw this shoe-horn at you. Do anything, scream, run around in circles, pant, anything, but *don't* look calm. Every minute I'm forgetting

something vital. Let me see, nail-brush, tooth-brush, cold-cream ——"

"If you go over that formula again, I'll be a mopping, mowing idiot," observed Alma serenely, from the window-seat. "I wonder how one mops and mows—it sounds awfully idiotic, doesn't it? I saw you put the nail-brush *and* the tooth-brush *and* the cold-cream in the tray there—left-hand corner. Now, for goodness' sake, forget about them—it's just little things like that that unhinge the greatest minds. You're horribly bad company while you're packing a trunk."

"Well, anyhow, it's nearly done now—and yours is ready."

"You're a lamb for doing mine for me—I haven't been a bit of help, I know. Oh, you *know* it's going to be glorious fun—at boarding school. I've always longed to go to boarding school. And it isn't awfully strict at Miss Leland's, Elise Porterbridge says. They have midnight feasts, and all sorts of things—and then, you know, Frank Barrows is at Harvard, and he asked me up there for some dance near Christmas. Don't you think Frank is very nice, Nancy?" This was what Alma had been leading around to, and Nancy knew it. Personally she thought Frank rather an affected youth, but she had sense enough not to air this opinion before Alma just then.

"Why, yes, he seems very nice," she replied, with very mild interest.

"I think he has sort of more to him than most men of his age," pursued Alma, affecting a judicial air.

"Probably he has."

"He dances beautifully. Goodness, I had a wonderful time the other night. I know that you probably think it's wrong of me, but I'd like nothing more than to go to a party like that every night in the week."

"*I* don't think it's wrong at all—only I think you'd probably get awfully sick of it in a little while. And—and the chief trouble as far as we are concerned is that it's so dreadfully expensive. I know you think I'm always harping on the same string—but do you remember the motto of Mr. Micawber — 'Income one pound — expenditure nineteen shillings and sixpence—product, happiness; income one pound, expenditure one pound and sixpence, product, misery ——'"

"Well, I know that's very sensible, but there's lots of sense to 'eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die,'" returned Alma, with a gay laugh. "You're thinking about my dress and slippers—I could have killed that person who spilt their fruit punch all over my skirt, but there was nothing to do about it, and besides I'm sure I can hide the

stain with a sash or something. I don't believe in worrying." With this, Madame Optimist turned and, pressing her short nose against the window pane, drummed with her little pink nails against the wet glass. The rain was falling again in a monotonous drenching downpour, stripping the trees of the few, brown, shivering leaves that clung to the dripping branches. The promise of Indian summer seemed to have been definitely broken for reasons of Dame Nature's own, and the weather was having a tantrum about it. But inside, the little bedroom was all the cosier in contrast to the woebegone gloom of the early dusk. The chintz window curtains of Nancy's making were faded by many washings, it is true, and the two white iron bedsteads might have looked sprucer for a coat of paint, but with a fire glowing in the grate, and sending out an almost affectionate glint upon all the familiar objects, the little room had an air of motherly cheerfulness and comfort. A shabby but inviting armchair stood in front of the hearth. In a corner, a white bookcase harbored a family of well-worn volumes, ranging from "Grimm's Fairy Tales," and "Stepping Stones to English Literature" to "The Three Musketeers" and "Jane Eyre," all tattered and thumbed, and seeming to wear the happy, weary expression of a rag doll that has been "loved to death."

"Well," Nancy was saying, in reply to Alma's observation, "I don't believe in worrying, but I do believe in having an umbrella if you live in a rainy climate. Then you don't have to worry about the —rain. *Comprenez-vous?*"

"I comprenez—you are talking in symbols, aren't you? Where's Mother?"

"Here I am, darling," replied Mrs. Prescott from the doorway. "Dear me, the trunks are all packed, aren't they? Nancy, what a wonderful child you are. Oh, whatever am I going to do without my daughters!"

"This time to-morrow night we'll all be dying of the blues. Thank goodness, here's Hannah with some tea—I'm starving," said Nancy, springing up to take the tray from the hands of the fat old woman, who had just made her appearance, her full, solemn red face looming behind the teapot.

They all gathered around the fire, Nancy and Alma settling cross-legged on the floor, and immediately opening a disastrous attack on the plate of chocolate cake—Hannah's prize contribution to this farewell feast.

"This time to-morrow night we'll probably be regaling ourselves on baked beans and cold rice-pudding," added Alma, cramming chocolate cake into her mouth like a greedy child. "That's an awful thought."

"Now, miss, ye don't suppose they'll be feedin' ye bad," exclaimed Hannah in great concern. The old woman had taken her stand respectfully near the doorway, loath to lose the last few glimpses of her adored young mistresses. "If ye think that now, I can send ye a box of jellies and the like any time ye say."

"Well, they'll probably give us something more than bread and water—but not much," replied Nancy, seriously. "They don't believe in giving students much to eat, because it hampers their brains."

"Is that so, now?" marvelled Hannah.

"It is indeed—it's a scientific fact, Hannah. When we come back for the Christmas holidays, we'll probably be so pale and wan that we won't even cast a shadow. But goodness, how clever we'll be."

"I'm a great believer in good feedin'," commented Hannah dubiously. "And I don't cotton much to scientifics, if you'll pardon me, miss. Lord, what an empty house 'twill be without ye."

"I hope you aren't insinuating that we take up much room," laughed Nancy; she was teasing Hannah to cover up her own growing sensation of homesickness and uneasiness. "Take good care of Mother, Hannah, and don't let her go out without her rubbers on, and—and make her write to us

every single day. It's ridiculous, I suppose, to talk as if we were going twelve hundred instead of twelve miles, but we've never been even twelve miles away from home before."

"Yes, and there's nothing like seeing something of the world to broaden a person," observed Alma, sagely. "When I'm grown up, I shall certainly travel. I intend to make a tour of the world. Egypt especially—goodness, I'd like to go to Egypt. That Edith Palliser was a lucky girl—her guardian took her to Paris and Rome and Cairo and even to Algiers, and she met all kinds of interesting people—a Spanish prince and a Russian count, and loads of artists and writers and things. I'm afraid that we must be terribly provincial."

"Ah, now, don't say that," remonstrated Hannah, who had no idea what "provincial" meant, and was consequently convinced that it must mean something very bad indeed. "Bless my soul! There's the bell—now who could be comin' here on a day like this?"

The door-bell had indeed been rung fiercely, and a second ring followed impatiently upon the first. Hannah vanished.

"Who in the world——" wondered Nancy. "Sh! It's some man."

Alma sprang up, and running out into the hall leaned curiously over the bannister. In a moment

she returned, looking as if she had seen a ghost, her mouth open, and her eyes popping.

"Nancy! Mother! I think it's *Uncle Thomas!*"

"Nonsense!" But Nancy too scrambled to her feet and stood listening with suspended breath. "Mother ——!"

"No, my dear—it—it *couldn't* be!" Mrs. Prescott had turned quite pale. "It must be just some tradesman. See—there's Hannah now."

But Hannah's face confirmed the dazing suspicion. Without even announcing the stupifying news, she leaned weakly against the doorway, and pressed her hand to her ample bosom, signifying an overwhelming agitation.

"Who *is* it, Hannah?"

"The saints protect us, miss—ma'am! Sure, it's the old gentleman himself—as large as life, indeed. 'Is the missis home?' says he, and before I can draw breath—'Tell her Mr. Prescott is waitin' on her, and would like to see the young ladies,' says he. And he sticks his soakin' umbrella in the corner, and without takin' off his overshoes, stalks into the livin'-room. 'Humph!' says he, seein' the hole in the carpet, 'that's dangerous. I like to have broken me neck. Be good enough to hurry, ma'am,' says he, 'an' don't stand gawpin' at me like a simpleton.' 'Will ye have a seat, sir?' says I. 'I will, when I want one,' says he, short-

like, and there he stands standin' and starin' around him, and suckin' at his lips, and kinda talkin' to hisself. What shall I be tellin' him, ma'am?"

This bomb seemed to have paralyzed the little family.

"I—I—tell him ——" stammered Mrs. Prescott, looking piteously at Nancy for help.

"You'd better go right down, Mother. Why, you look frightened to death, dear."

"I am. He frightens me dreadfully. I can't bear sarcastic people. Do go down alone, Nancy, —tell him I have a headache."

"No, no! That wouldn't be wise. What can he say? He may want to be very nice," said Nancy, reassuringly. "Come along—don't keep him waiting. Here, just tuck up your hair a bit. Come on, Alma."

Inwardly quaking, but outwardly preserving a dignified composure, the three descended the staircase, with the calmness of people going to some inevitable fate.

"He can't bite you, dear," whispered Nancy to her mother, with a nervous little giggle.

Mr. Prescott was standing perfectly still, with his back toward the door, staring with an evidently absorbed interest at the wall in front of him. He turned slowly, as Mrs. Prescott entered the room,

and for a moment surveyed her and the two girls without speaking. Then he said, casually:

"Good-afternoon, Lallie."

Alma shot a glance at Nancy.

"Good-afternoon, Uncle Thomas," said Mrs. Prescott, in a rather faint voice, and flushing crimson with nervousness. "It—it is very kind of you ——"

"Not at all," he interrupted, brusquely, "not at all. May we have a light—it is rather dark."

Nancy quickly lit the gas, and as the light from the jet shone down on her upturned face the old man scrutinized her keenly. A queer, half-tender, but repressed expression changed the lines in his stern old face for a moment, then he looked at Alma, who was regarding him with perfectly unconcealed terror and awe.

"How do you do?" he said to her, holding out his hand. "How do you do? You're my niece Alma, eh? Anne is the one who looks like—like my nephew, and Alma is the one who resembles her mother." He said this as if he were repeating some directions to himself. "I haven't seen you since you were children." He shook Alma's hand formally, and sat down at Mrs. Prescott's timid invitation. The short silence which ensued, while it seemed like an age of discomfort to the Prescotts, apparently was unobserved by him.

"It has been a very long time since—since I have seen you, Uncle Thomas," said Mrs. Prescott in desperation, quite aware that this remark, like any one she should make just then, was a very awkward one.

"Yes. I never go out, madam. So this is Anne —Nancy, eh?" He turned abruptly to the girl and met her clear, steady eyes sharply. "You were a child—a very little girl when I saw you last. You resemble my nephew very much,—my—my dear.

"No doubt, madam, you are wondering at the reason of this visit," he said, all at once plunging into the heart of matters with an air of impatience at any "beating about the bush." "I've no doubt it was the last thing in the world you expected, eh?"

"It was indeed a surprise," murmured Mrs. Prescott.

"I realized that my grandnieces are growing up, and I had a curiosity to see them. There is the kernel of the matter. They are handsome girls. I suppose everyone knows that they have a rich uncle—and prospects, eh?"

"Neither my daughters nor anyone else has been deluded in that respect," answered Mrs. Prescott, with a touch of spirit.

"Hum. Well, that's good, I should say. Nothing puts anyone in such a false position as to be gen-

erally regarded as having—prospects. It's ruinous, especially for girls."

"My daughters have been taught that they must rely entirely on themselves. You need not have come to repeat the lesson to them, Uncle Thomas," returned Mrs. Prescott, trying to conceal her temper. Mr. Prescott affected not to notice her rising annoyance, which was a natural enough reaction from her earlier nervousness. Instead he next addressed himself directly to Alma.

"So you think I'm a regular old ogre, don't you, my dear?" His eyes suddenly twinkled at her palpable terror and distress, but only Nancy caught the twinkle. "You think I'm a queer, crotchety old fellow, eh? Well, don't let's talk about me. I want to know what you are planning to do with yourselves—an old man's curiosity. Your face is your fortune, my dear—though a pretty face is not infrequently a misfortune, so the wiseacres say. I understand that you two young ladies are going now to a fashionable school,—to learn how to be fashionable, no doubt. That's a folly—it would be better if you stayed at home and learned how to cook and darn."

"We *can* cook and darn," said Nancy, demurely.

"So? Good. Now tell me why are you going to this school? It's no place for poor girls. I suppose it's some woman's notion of yours, ma'am?"

pursued the old gentleman, turning to Mrs. Prescott.

"My plans for my daughters can concern you so little, Uncle Thomas——" began Mrs. Prescott, throwing her usual diplomacy to the winds.

"That it behooves me to mind my own business, eh?" Mr. Prescott finished for her with perfect good-humor. "You are quite right, madam." He seemed really pleased at Mrs. Prescott's spirit, and went on, "You do right to tell me so. I have acted in a most unkinsmanly way toward my nieces, and consequently it's none of my business what they do or what they don't do. Well, if you had allowed me to interfere in this matter, I should have imagined that you were doing so simply because you wanted to get into my good graces, and so forth, which would have been quite useless in as far as it would have changed my plans in regard to them. It's a very silly thing you are doing with them, in my opinion, but I'm glad you have spirit enough to stick to your own mind. Now, my dear, don't be angry with me. Understand that I have come to interfere in your plans in no way at all. It's not my purpose to use your poverty and your need for my money as a force by which to tyrannize over you. I had these thoughts in mind when I came here to-day—on an old man's whimsical impulse: I wished, first of all, to put a period to the unfriendli-

ness that has existed beween us all these years; I wished to see my nieces, and I wished, at the same time—and in order to avoid any false attitude on your part or on my own—to have it clearly understood that you must not expect any financial assistance from me. Live out your own lives—think out your own problems—make your mistakes, fearlessly—do not, I beg you, humiliate yourselves by trying to conciliate an old man, who chooses to do what he will with the money he made with his own wits and labor. There, that is particularly what I wanted to say to you. Don't try to 'work' me. Don't expect anything from me. Thus, if we are friends, it will be a disinterested friendship. Otherwise, if I felt that we were on good terms, I should be thinking to myself—'It is only because I am the rich uncle.' If you were amiable with me, I'd think, 'That's because they are afraid of angering me.' Now—let us be friends. I think I can be very fond of my nieces—but don't expect anything from me. Is that clear? Will you make friends with an old man on those terms?" He looked first into Mrs. Prescott's eyes, and saw that she was still hostile; at Alma, and read her bewilderment in her face, and then at Nancy. Again his eyes softened, almost touchingly, and with quick instinct she understood the appeal that lay beneath his brusque language. She remembered her father's stories of

his tenderness, and somehow she understood that what the old man longed for was the simple affection of which for so long his life had been empty. And she understood, too, his dread of gaining that affection by holding out hopes of payment for it. His reiterated "Don't expect anything of me," was more of a plea than a curt warning. He wanted their good-will for himself, and not for his money —that was what he was trying to say in his brusque, almost crude, way. Her eyes were bright with this understanding of his heart, and she held out her hand with a smile; for he seemed to have turned directly to her for his answer. He grasped her hand eagerly.

"There!" he exclaimed, with an almost child-like pleasure. "There is George's daughter, every inch. We understand each other, eh? Good girl. We shall be friends, eh? I'm a friend—not a rich old uncle, who'll give you what you want, if you manage him right. That's it, you understand? Now, this is pleasant—this is honest. Be independent, my dear. Don't expect anything of me. I tell you—if I thought that it was only thoughts of my money that bought your good-will, I'd give the last cent of it away to-morrow."

He got up, evidently well satisfied, and still retaining Nancy's hand in his. The other he held out to Mrs. Prescott, who took it, with a constrained

smile; and then, in high good-humor he pinched Alma's dimpled chin playfully.

"Good-day! Good-day! I'm glad I came. We'll know each other better after a while. We understand each other, eh? The hatchet is buried, eh? Good. It's a piece of business I've been putting off for a long while. Tut-tut! Where's my umbrella?"

The three Prescotts stood at the window, staring with varying feelings at the stooped, but surprisingly agile old figure that walked off through the rain and fog, head down, the worn velvet collar of his old coat hunched around his neck—and with never a look behind. Then, all at once, both Alma and Nancy broke out laughing.

"You seemed to get along with him beautifully," chuckled Alma. "Goodness, he scared me out of my five wits—so that I couldn't understand a word he was saying. I couldn't tell you for the life of me what he was talking about. I think he must be crazy. But he doesn't seem so bad at all. At times he even looked rather nice."

"Why, I believe he *is* nice," said Nancy. "He's a funny, eccentric old man, but I'm sure that he'd be rather a dear, if he doesn't think that we are trying to 'manage' him as he says."

Mrs. Prescott was silent, her pretty face frowning a little. Nancy looked at her a moment, and then

putting her arms around her, rubbed her own ruddy cheek against her mother's pink one.

"Put yourself in his place, Mother," she said gently. "He's very lonely—he wants to be friendly—he was thinking of Father all the time, you know. But he has a horror of our being affectionate with him just for the sake of his money. Imagine what it would be to be a lonely old man, always troubled by the thought that the only reason people would be nice to him was because they were hoping to profit by it."

"He made it very clear that he has no intention of—of helping us in that way," said Mrs. Prescott.

"And I'm glad of it. I'm glad of it!" cried Nancy. "I don't want to act and think and live to conciliate a rich relative. I think that must be the most hateful position in the world. I want to forget that Uncle Thomas is very rich and very old—just as he wants us to forget it. I want to make my own life, and have no one to thank or to blame for whatever I accomplish but myself."

"What an independent lassie! You are right, dear," said Mrs. Prescott, touching the little curls around Nancy's flushed face affectionately. "You are right. You are like a boy, aren't you? I was never that way myself—and that was the trouble. You have such good sense, my dear. Whatever am I going to do without you?"

CHAPTER VIII

THE FIRST NIGHT AT SCHOOL

Miss Leland's school wore that sober title with a somewhat frivolous air. It seemed to be saying, "Oh, call me a school if you want to—but don't take me seriously." It was like a pretty girl, who puts on a pair of bone-rimmed spectacles in fun and assumes a studious expression, while the dimples lurk in her cheeks.

It was a low, rambling, white building, with a stately colonial portico, and broad porches at each wing. In front, an immaculate lawn swept to the trim hedges that bordered the road; in the back, this lawn sloped downward to a grove of trees, which were now almost bare. Under them stood several picturesque stone benches, while just beyond lay a wide, terrace-garden with a sun-dial in the centre. Altogether, it resembled a pleasant country place, dedicated to merriment and good cheer.

Through the dusk of a rather bleak autumn night, its friendly lights shone out comfortably as the two Prescotts jogged up to the door in the station wagon.

The trip up from the Broadmore Station had not, however, been a lively one, despite the fact that two other girls besides the Prescotts had taken the hack with them; the first spasm of homesickness having evidently seized them all simultaneously. One of the girls, a little, sallow-faced creature, sat like a mouse in her corner, and by occasional dismal sniffles, gave notice that she was weeping and did not want to be disturbed. The other, a plump miss with scarlet cheeks and perfectly round eyes, had bravely essayed a conversation.

"Are you going to Miss Leland's?"

"Yes."

"Is this your first year?"

"Yes."

"What's your names?"

The Prescotts gave her the information, and she told them in exchange that her name was Maizie Forrest, that she was from Pittsburgh, that she had a brother at Yale, and another at Pomfret, and that she thought it no end of fun that they, the Prescotts, were going to Miss Leland's. After this flow of confidence, conversation languished and expired in the silence of dismal thoughts.

The hack drove up to the door, and deposited the four girls on the steps. Then they entered the hall, from which was issuing a perfect babel of feminine squeaks and chattering.

As Nancy and Alma stood together, frankly clinging hand to hand, a husky damsel rushed past them and precipitated herself on the neck and shoulders of the conversational Maizie.

"Maizie, darling!"

"Jane, dearest! When did you get here?"

"Been here hours. My dear, we're going to room together! Isn't that scrumptious?"

"Perfectly divine. Where's Alice?"

"Hasn't come yet. Come on, let's go see M'amzelle."

The small, weepy girl stood still gazing mournfully at the rapturous meetings about her.

Nancy looked at her sympathetically, but she felt much too blue and strange herself to try to urge anyone else to be cheerful.

"I don't know where we go, or what we're supposed to do, do you?" she whispered to Alma.

"No. I hope to goodness it's near supper time. There, I think that's Miss Leland."

A tall, very thin, very erect lady, wearing noseglasses attached to a long gold chain, and with sparkling, fluffy white hair that made her face look quite brown in contrast, was descending the stairs. Several of the girls rushed to her, and she kissed them peckishly. Evidently they were old pupils. Nancy and Alma heard her asking them about their dear mothers and their charming fathers, and where

they had been during the summer, and if (playfully) they were going to work very, very hard. And the girls were saying:

"*Dear* Miss Leland, it's so *nice* to be back again!"

Nancy and Alma approached her a little uncertainly. The other girls drew back and frankly stared at them. "New girls," they heard whispered, and for some reason the appellation made them both feel terribly "out of it."

"Miss Leland," began Nancy, coloring, "I—I'm Anne Prescott—I—this is my sister Alma—I—er——"

"Why, yes. I'm so glad you got here safely," said Miss Leland, quite cordially, taking Nancy's hand and Alma's at the same time. "Of course you want to know where your room is. You two are going to room together to-night, anyway. Later you will probably have different roommates. Now, let me see—Mildred, this is Anne Prescott, and this is Alma. They are new girls, so I'm going to count on you to help them find themselves a little. They are going to be next door to you to-night, so will you take them up-stairs?"

A very handsome, very haughty-looking girl, with gray eyes and a Roman nose, shook hands with them briefly. The sisters followed her in a subdued silence. She was the sort of girl plainly destined to become one of the most frigid and formi-

dable of dowagers; it was impossible to look at her profile, her fur coat, or to meet her cold, critical glance without immediately picturing her with a lorgnon, crisply marcelled gray hair, and the wintry smile with which the typical, unapproachable matron can freeze out the slightest attempt at an unwelcome friendliness on the part of an inconsequential person. Her last name was weighty with importance, since she was the daughter of Marshall Lloyd, the well-known railroad magnate.

"I shan't like *her*," Nancy remarked to Alma, when this young lady had indicated their room to them, and left them with a curt announcement that they should go down-stairs in fifteen minutes.

"She *is* sort of snob-looking," agreed Alma, throwing her hat on her narrow white bed. "But there's no sense in being prejudiced against a person right away. Goodness, this room is chilly. I wish we knew somebody here. I hate being a new girl. Everyone else sounds as if they are having such a good time. I feel dreadfully out of it, don't you? And all the girls look at you as if they were wondering who in the world you are."

"Well, it's only natural that we feel that way now," said Nancy, trying to sound cheerful. "Come on, we've got to hurry."

From the line of rooms along the corridor issued

the unceasing chatter of gay voices; there was a continual scampering back and forth, bursts of tumultuous greetings, giggles, shrieks. Alma, comb in hand, stood at the doorway, listening with a wistful droop to her lips. Two doors down, four girls were perched up on a trunk, kicking it with their patent-leather heels, and gabbling like magpies. In the room opposite, five girls, curled up on the two beds, were gossiping blithely, while a sixth, a pretty, red-haired girl, was gaily unpacking her trunk, flinging her lingerie with great skill across the room into the open drawers of the bureau, which caught stockings and petticoats very much as a dog will catch a bone in his mouth. They were all having such a good time—and they all seemed to have a lengthy history of gay summer's doings to relate. Each one jabbered away, apparently perfectly regardless of what the others were saying.

"Oh, my dear, I *did* have the most marvellous time——"

"Dick told me——"

"Are you going to come out next winter——"

"Margie's wedding was perfectly gorgeous—and *I* caught the bouquet——"

"Tom is coming down for the midwinter dance——"

"Who *is* that frump who's rooming with Sara——"

"Dozens of new girls. Hope some of 'em are human, anyway ——"

"Come on, Alma. Hurry! You haven't even washed yet," said Nancy, impatiently. "We've got to go down-stairs ——"

"Yes, and stand around gaping like ninnies," added Alma, morosely, coming back to the mirror, and beginning to brush out her thick, yellow hair.

"It'll be ever so much nicer when we come back here after the Christmas holidays," said Nancy, busily polishing her nails, to hide the mist that would creep over her eyes. "To-morrow we can fix up this room a bit—if we can put up some chintz curtains, and get a few books and cushions around, it'll be as good as home, almost."

"But—but Mother won't be here, and neither will Hannah—boo-hoo!" And here Alma quite suddenly burst out crying, wrinkling up her pretty face like a child of two. With the tears dripping off her chin, she continued to brush her hair vigorously, sobbing and sniffling pathetically. Nancy looked up, and, unable any longer to control her own tears, while at the same time she was almost hysterically amused by Alma's ridiculously droll expression of grief, began to sob and giggle alternately. Alma, still clutching the brush, promptly threw herself into Nancy's arms, and there they sat,

clinging together, and frankly wailing like a pair of lost children, in full view of the corridor.

"I—I want to—g-go h-home——" sniffled Alma.

"I—I don't like that girl with th-the n-nose——" wailed Nancy. "D-Do f-fix your hair, Alma. I-If you're l-late for d-dinner w-we'll be expelled. Here——" she tried to twist up Alma's unruly mane, hardly realizing what she *was* trying to do, while Alma tenderly mopped Nancy's wet cheeks with her own little, soaking handkerchief.

"I—I say! You two aren't *howling*, are you?" inquired a drawling, utterly amazed voice from the doorway. The two girls looked up, their hostile expressions plainly asking whose business it was if they *were* howling—but promptly their hostility vanished.

A very tall, astonishingly lank girl was standing in the doorway, feet apart, and hands clasped behind her back, regarding them amiably through a pair of enormous, bone-rimmed goggles. Every now and again, she would blink her eyes, and screw up her face comically, while she continued to smile, showing a set of teeth as large and white as pebbles.

"You were saying something about being expelled. Are you expelled already? *Ex plus pello, pellere pulsi pulsum*—meaning to push out, or, as we say in the vernacular, to kick out, fire, bounce.

Miss Drinkwater likes us to note the Latin derivations of all our English words, and I've got the habit. You two seem to be lachrymosus, or blue —by which I take it that you are new girls. I sympathize with you, although I am an ancient. Two years ago this very night, I wept so hard that I nearly gave my roommate pneumonia from the dampness. How-do-you-do?" With this unconventional preliminary, accompanied by one of the friendliest and most disarming grins imaginable, the newcomer marched over to the bed and shook hands vigorously.

"My name is Charlotte Lucretia Adela Spencer. Really it is. You must take my word for it. But I only use the 'Charlotte.' The others I keep in case of emergency. I room next door, with Mildred Lloyd—who, incidentally, is a perfect lady, while *I* am not. I was born in the year 1903, in the city of Denver, Colorado—but of that, more anon. It's tremendously interesting, but if *you*—is your name Alma?—if you don't get your coiffure coifed, you'll miss out on our evening repast. Wiggle, my dear, wiggle!"

Thus urged, Alma "wiggled" accordingly; and while she carefully washed her tear-stained face, and put up her hair, their visitor, sprawling across the bed, kept up a running fire of ridiculous remarks, all uttered in her peculiar, dry, drawling

voice, and punctuated with the oddest facial contortions. Yet, in spite of her nonsense, there was very evidently a good deal of real sense, and the kindest feeling behind it, and her singular face, too unusual to be called either plain or pretty, beamed with satisfaction when she had won a genuine peal of laughter from the two dejected Prescotts.

"We'd better go down now. To-night of course everything is more or less topsy-turvy. My trunk, I think, must be still out in Kokomo, Indiana, or some such place. I don't even expect to see it for another month or so. But *I* don't mind. I'm a regular child of nature anyway—it's just Amelia who's pernickety about our appearing in full regalia every night for dinner. Amelia is Leland, of course. She's tremendously keen on preserving a refining influence about the school, and I think she looks on me as a rather demoralizing factor. There goes the gong."

The three went down-stairs together, Charlotte linking herself between Nancy and Alma.

As if by magic, the din of a few moments before had been lulled. The fifty or sixty girls had gathered in the large reception room, where a wood-fire was blazing up a huge stone chimney, and where Miss Leland, wearing a dignified black evening dress, was seated in a pontifical chair, chatting with eight or ten of her charges, with the air of a

gracious hostess. All the voices had sunk to a lower key.

"Is everyone here?" She looked about her, and closing the book she had been toying with led the way into the dining-room beyond, where the ten or twelve small tables, with their snowy covers, and softly shaded candles gave the room more the appearance of a quiet restaurant than the ordinary school refectory.

Charlotte Spencer sat with Nancy at a table near Miss Leland's; while Alma found herself separated from her sister, and relegated to another table where she was completely marooned among five strange girls.

Charlotte introduced Nancy to a sallow maiden with prominent front teeth, named Allison Maitland, to a statuesque brunette named Katherine Leonard ——

"The school beauty," was her brief comment. "And this is Denise Lloyd, sister of Mildred, my roommate. Hope we have soup."

"Are you any relation to Lawrence Prescott, who goes to Williams?" asked the beautiful Katherine, turning to Nancy with a slightly patronizing air. Nancy vaguely disclaimed a kinship that might have won her Miss Leonard's interest, and thereby quickly lost some of it.

"No, she's not, she says," said Charlotte. "Is

he a beau of yours? 'Yes,' replied the girl, a soft blush mantling her damask cheek. 'Naturally he's a beau of mine. Who isn't?' and with this keen retort, she again lost herself in her maiden meditations. But I'll tell you who she is a relation of—she's the thirty-second cousin once removed of 'Prescott's Conquest of Peru'—aren't you, Nancy?"

"Charlotte, you're a scream," said Katherine, with an affected laugh, and turning to Nancy, she went on, speaking in a mincing voice, and always placing her lips as if she were continually guarding against spoiling the symmetry of their perfect cupid's bow. "You know, we always expect Charlotte to say funny things."

"I'm the school buffoon, in other words," commented Charlotte, dryly—evidently not much liking to be marked as a professional humorist. "I'm supposed to be '*so* amusin', doncherknow'—and consequently, everyone is expected to haw-haw whenever I open my mouth. But if you listen carefully, you'll be surprised to hear that at times I talk sense. Now, Allison here is the school genius. You'd never suspect it, but she is. I wish to goodness that new waitress would bring me some more bread. It isn't considered stylish around here to have the bread on the table, but I do wish they'd consider my appetite."

"Is that perfectly sweet-looking girl over there your sister?" asked Katherine, indicating Alma, her slightly patronizing air still more pronounced.

"Your new rival for the golden apple, Kate," remarked Charlotte, with a grin. "And a blonde, too."

Katherine flushed, and tried to laugh off her annoyance at Charlotte's impish teasing.

"I think she's perfectly lovely."

"Oh, handsome is as handsome does, so they say. The question is has she a beautiful soul. Now, my soul is something wonderful—if it would only show through a bit," murmured Charlotte. "I'm plain, but good, as they say of calico. There's a rumor to the effect that Cleopatra was very ugly; hope it's so. There are two alternatives for an ugly woman—either to be tremendously good and noble, or to be very, very wicked—I can't make up my mind which career to choose. It's an awful problem."

"I'm going to take muthick lethons thith year, Tharlotte—with Mithter Conthtantini," lisped Denise Lloyd. "Don't you think he'th jutht wonderful?" Denise did not resemble her sister in the least. She was a plump, roly-poly girl of sixteen, still at the giggly, gushing stage of her life—but much more likable than the haughty Mildred.

She turned to Nancy, with the polite desire of including the new girl in the conversation, and went on with a blush, "Mithter Conthtantini is jutht *wonderful.* Are you going to take muthick lethons? You'd jutht *love* him! And bethides, if you take muthick, you can drop thience."

"I don't think I could get very far with the piano in one year," said Nancy with a smile.

"Oh, he doethn't teach piano. He teacheth violin."

"And of course, the violin is *so* much simpler," remarked Charlotte. "Mr. Constantini has a rolling black eye, and an artistic temperament—inclined to have fits, *I* think ——"

"Fitth, Tharlotte!" cried Denise, in bitter reproach. "Why, he'th jutht *lovely!* He doethn't have fitth at *all!*"

"Well, it sounds as if *somebody* were having fits, to hear all the awful squeaks and groans that come out of the music room, while one of our rising Paganinis is having her lesson. I always imagined that it was poor Mr. Constantini," replied Charlotte, mildly. "Anyway, the point is, that Constantini is a beautiful creature, and consequently a year of violin is considered infinitely more improving than a year of science. Personally, I think that the study of the violin ought to be forbidden under penalty of the law, except in cases of the most

acute genius. I think that the playing of one wrong note on the violin ought to be punishable by a heavy fine, and playing two, by imprisonment for life, or longer. There are times when I feel that hanging is far too good for Dolly Parker. She ought to be boiled in oil, until tender ——"

Nancy laughed.

"So you take the year of science? That's where I belong, too, I suppose."

"Tharlotte plays the piano jutht beautifully," said Denise. "She compotheth ——"

"My brother calls it decomposition," said Charlotte, reddening, as she always did when any of her talents were lauded, and trying to turn it off with a joke.

Miss Leland rose, and the room became silent, since she appeared to be about to make an announcement.

"To-night, girls, there is, of course, no study-hour, and special privileges are extended to you all," she said, in her clear, well-trained voice. "You have an hour for recreation after dinner, and I hope that all the old girls will make a point of helping our new girls to forget that they are not at home. Prayers will be at nine, as usual, and you will not be required to be in your rooms before nine-forty-five. No doubt you all have a great deal to talk about, so I am going to be lenient with

you to-night. To-morrow, the regular school regime will be resumed."

"Hooray! Nancy, you and Alma are herewith cordially invited to my room to a negligee party at nine-twenty sharp. I had the good sense to bring a few delicacies with me, leaving my trunk to the tender mercies of the express company." Charlotte rose, and taking Nancy's arm, filed out of the dining-room with the other girls, behind Miss Leland.

But in the living-room, a small band of girls fell upon Charlotte.

"Come along, old dear. Some dance-music now. Come on." And they bore her off to the piano, deposited her almost bodily upon the bench, and opened the keyboard. Three others rolled back the rugs from the polished floor, and in a moment a dozen couples were spinning around as gaily as if they were at a ball.

Nancy, a prey to her usual shyness in the midst of strangers, clung close to the piano, where Charlotte, without pausing in her astonishingly clever playing, reached up, and drew her down on the piano bench, from where she could watch Alma.

Alma's prettiness and natural gaiety was having its usual success. The younger girls crowded around her, the older girls petted her. Even the frigid Mildred made her dance with her. Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes bright again. By

some indescribable charm she had walked into instant popularity.

Without a shadow of envy, Nancy watched her, proudly. Alma was easily the prettiest girl in the school—everyone must like her, everything must go smoothly and gaily for her. There were people like that in the world—people who didn't have to be wise or prudent—some kindly providence seemed always to protect them from the consequences of their lack of common sense, just as kindly nature protects the butterflies.

The dancers stopped one by one. Some gathered in groups about the fire, others clustered in the window-seats—one or two practical souls had gone to their rooms to put away some of their things.

Charlotte's nimble fingers began to wander idly among the keys. Nancy watched her curiously, listening in some surprise to the change in the music. She felt an instinctive fondness for this big, whimsical, friendly girl, and knew very well that underneath her nonsense lay a streak of some fine quality that would make an unshakeable foundation for a genuine friendship. She would have liked to talk to Charlotte by herself; but Charlotte was already talking in her own way. She seemed to have quite forgotten Nancy and everyone else in the room, and with her head bent over the keys, she was playing for herself. Little by little, the other girls

stopped talking. She did not notice that at all. Nancy listened to her playing in astonishment. It was far beyond anything like ordinary schoolgirl facility. It was full of genuine talent and poetry, now smooth and lyrical, and again as capricious and impish as some of her own moods.

She raised her head, and looked at Nancy with an absent-minded smile.

"Like music?" Nancy nodded.

"I believe you really do. You aren't just saying so, are you? Well, I like you—ever so much. Listen, don't get the idea that everything I say is meant to be funny—sometimes—I'm very serious —you wouldn't believe it, would you?"

CHAPTER IX

A QUARREL

You had your choice, at Miss Leland's, between studying, and doing what the large majority of the girls did; namely, making friends, reading novels during your study periods, and leaving it to Providence to decide whether you passed your examinations or not. The teachers were lenient souls, with the exception of Miss Drinkwater, the Latin teacher, who was unreasonably irritable when her pupils came to class armed with the seraphic smiles of ignorance, and a number of convincing excuses, which invariably failed to convince Miss Drinkwater. In consequence, very few of the girls pursued their studies in that classic tongue longer than the first month. "What point was there in doing so?" they argued coolly; none of them had any aspirations toward college, and nearly all of them harbored a dread of learning anything that might show on the surface, and thereby discourage the attentions of the college youths which were of infinitely more importance in their eyes, as indeed, in the eyes of their fond

mothers, likewise, than the attainment of the scholarly graces.

Miss Leland's was one of those schools instituted primarily to meet the necessity of our young plutocrats for mingling with their own peculiar kind—"forming advantageous connections," it is called—the question of education was secondary if not quite negligible. The daughters of steel magnates came from Pittsburgh to meet the daughters of railroad magnates from New York, and incidentally to meet one another's brothers, at the small social functions which Miss Leland gave ostensibly for the purpose of developing in her charges an easy poise and the most correct drawing-room manners.

The girls, for the most part, regarded lessons as a wholly unnecessary adjunct to their school duties, and treated them as such. And this was all very well indeed, so far as they were concerned. From school they would plunge into the whirl of their débutante season, and from that into marriage—it was all clearly mapped out for them, and the shadow of any serious doubt as to the course of their careers never fell across their serenely trustful indolence.

There is something peculiarly vitiating in such an atmosphere. Pleasure was regarded not merely as an embroidery on the sober fustian of life, but as the very warp and woof of it; where the

most sober consideration was that of winning popularity and the opportunity of social advantages, where the clothes to be bought and the parties to be given during the holidays were already the subject of endless absorbing discussions.

The effect of all this on each of the Prescotts was diametrically opposed. Alma had adapted herself to it as easily as to a new cloak. Not having any stubborn notions of her own, she was as malleable to such an environment as a piece of modelling clay in warm water. Pretty, good-humored, easily led, she swam into a rather meaningless popularity inside of four days. This Nancy was glad of, but her satisfaction was not unmixed. She saw Alma gradually undergoing a change that threatened to damage her own steadying influence over her sister, and to divide their sympathies. Alma was only too ready, and too well suited temperamentally, to lose sight of the difference between her own circumstances, and those of the girls with whom she was now associated. Indeed the very fact that she could do so, while Nancy could not, lay at the root of the problem that had begun to worry Nancy. Aside from minor changes in Alma, such as, for instance, a new little affectedness of manner, unconsciously borrowed from Mildred Lloyd, and her use of Mildred's particular slang phrases, Nancy had noticed in her sister at times a tinge of impatience, and a

little air of superiority, with which Alma unwillingly listened to her when she tried to talk to her seriously. Nancy began to feel, unhappily, that Alma was coming to resent her efforts to guide her and advise her in regard to various small matters, and worst of all, that Alma was privately beginning to look upon her as rather unnecessarily serious, and even old-maidish.

It was impossible for Nancy to lose the feeling that she had that her mother had made a mistake in sending them to Miss Leland's, which gave them little or nothing that they could use, and was very likely to affect even her own steady vision of their circumstances and opportunities. She was continually trying to counteract the consequences of this mistake; but Alma was less than willing to take her point of view.

Nancy still clung to her plan of getting herself ready for college; never for a moment could she lose sight of the fact that in all probability she would have to make her own living, which Alma, like her mother, was very ready to forget, counting always as they did on happy chance, to smooth out the future for them into a sunny vista. It was not that Nancy was a pessimist. She simply believed that good luck was something more or less of one's own making. She was full of eagerness and enthusiasm for life, as ardent as an ambitious boy,

and restive to make a trial of her own capabilities. She knew that there was a possibility of her uncle's providing for them, after all, in spite of his own very clear hints to the contrary; but on the other hand, there remained the fact that he was an eccentric old fellow, more than equally likely to bequeath his entire fortune to some freakish project, or obscure charity organization.

It was not a very easy task to study seriously at Miss Leland's. An earnest student was immediately dubbed, vividly enough, if inelegantly, a "greasy grind"—and was left more or less to her own devices; but if Nancy was not as popular as Alma, she was regarded with a good deal of respect and genuine admiration by the other girls, and in Charlotte Spencer she had found a really devoted friend.

Underneath her apparent rattle-patedness, Charlotte concealed from the view of those for whom she had no especial regard a stratum of rather unusual common sense, mingled with an idealism and a youthful ardor which few would have suspected in her nature. Opinions concerning her varied widely. Mildred Lloyd considered her crude, for example; most of the girls thought her simply amusing and odd, and hardly knew how to account for some of her queer, serious moods. In one way or another, without apparently studying at all, she

managed always to take the highest marks in the school.

She was the only daughter of a very rich Western mine-owner, a widower, who found the problem of managing this child of his more difficult than any commercial nut he had ever had to crack. He had only the vaguest notions as to what was necessary for a girl's career, and imagined that by sending his daughter to a fashionable Eastern school, he was getting at the heart of the solution. Charlotte wanted to study music, "not like a boarding-school miss," she told Nancy. "I want to make it the real thing. I tell you I don't know anything about it—but I'm going to, yet." Old Mr. Spencer, while he had no objections to one of the arts as a ladylike accomplishment, felt that it was not exactly respectable for a girl to go into it seriously, just why, he would have been at a loss to say. "You know," Charlotte had explained, with her humorous smile, "there is a notion that it's all right for a 'lady' to dabble in anything, painting, music, or embroidery and so on, so long as she doesn't attempt to make a profession of it, or think of making money by it. Of course this idea is changing now a bit, but people like Mildred Lloyd, for instance, and all her kind, still think it's not perfectly '*nice*' as she puts it." It was not in the least that Mr. Spencer had even a grain of snobbishness in his rough, vigorous make-

up, so far as either himself or his three sons were concerned; his very love for his "Charlie," as he called her, made him stubborn in his ideas concerning what was best for her. He wanted her to have everything that he could give her, and he gave her what he imagined her mother would have wanted him to give. It was because Charlotte understood that his stubbornness grew out of his adoration of her, that she good-naturedly gave in to his wishes.

"In good time, I'll do what I want, of course," she said with serene self-confidence. "But the least I can do for darling old Dad is to make him believe that all the time I'm doing what *he* wants. He *is* such a lamb, you know."

The warm friendship that grew up between the two girls had a strong bond in the similarity of their position at Miss Leland's, and in the circumstances of their being there, as well as in their mutual sympathy with each other's ideas.

It was a Saturday afternoon, late in October, when the days were rapidly shortening into wintry dusks, and there was even the hint of an early snow in the slate-colored skies, against which the bare, stiff branches of the trees shivered in a nipping wind. Nancy, all ruddy, and breezy from a brisk walk with Charlotte, had come up to her room to finish an English paper. Across the hall a group of girls had gathered around Katherine Leonard's

chafing dish, from which the tantalizing smell of thick, hot fudge was beginning to pervade the corridors, and distract the thoughts of the more studious from their unsocial but conscientious labors.

"Come on in, Nance," called Alma, waving a sticky spoon invitingly. "Surely you aren't going to work now, are you?"

Nancy hesitated, her hand on the door-knob. They all looked so jolly, the room so cosy, and the warm, chocolaty smell of the fudge was almost irresistible. Nancy's nose twitched at the delicious odor, and she smiled uncertainly.

"I've got to finish my English," she began.

"Oh, bother your English," cried Dolly Parker. "None of us have even looked at ours yet. Don't be a 'grind'—come on."

"You're such a shark at it, Miss Garnett wouldn't bother you if you loafed for a month," added Maizie Forrest. This was quite true—and that was the trouble. It was just because Miss Garnett was so lenient that Nancy felt the responsibility of keeping up in her work resting heavily on herself. Nearly all the girls loafed shamelessly, and Nancy had to guard against the temptation to imitate them. She knew that she would have to pass a stiff examination in English to enter college, and that it mattered nothing to Miss Garnett whether she passed or not.

"Well, the point is that I've got so little to do on it that I might as well finish it up and feel free," she said, finally. "I'll come in a little while, so don't, for goodness' sake, eat all the fudge."

"Oh, Nancy, you make me tired," pouted Alma. "If you're going to be such an old poke, you don't deserve any fudge."

Nancy only laughed in reply, and calmly went in to her room, and shut the door. She flung her sweater on her bed, sent her scarlet tam-o'-shanter after it, and then stood for a moment, her hands in the pockets of her skirt, looking about her. The Prescotts' room was certainly not the cosiest and most inviting in the school, and she had listened long to Alma's petitions for an easy chair, and a new lamp to take the place of the green-shaded student's lamp which by its hard, sharp light intensified the severe bareness of the little place. Besides the two beds, there were the two desks, two stiff desk-chairs, and the two small bureaus. Nothing had been added to soften the chilly aspect except a pair of cheap, chintz curtains at the window, and a few small cushions on the window-seat. They had no pictures or photographs, no rugs, no tea service—none of the hundred and one little knickknacks with which the other girls managed to turn their bedrooms into luxurious little dens. Consequently, they were never besieged by bands of hilarious call-

ers, and Alma herself was never in her room any more than she could help. At night she preferred a dressing-gown chat in Mildred's room, or in Kay Leonard's; even when she studied, which occupied, indeed, little enough of her time, she sought a more congenial atmosphere, and Nancy, except for Charlotte's company, was a good deal by herself. But there was nothing to be done about it. She could not go to the expense of a new rug and an easy chair and a new lamp, and that was all there was to it. Alma felt ashamed of the mute confession of a narrow purse, expressed by the chill simplicity of the room; losing her memory of their straitened means amid the easy affluence of the other girls, she became more and more sulky against Nancy for her rigid economy. She contended that she saw no reason for it—that Nancy was carrying it to unnecessary extremes.

With a shrug of her shoulders, Nancy began to rummage in her desk for her half-finished English paper, and then sat down to it, grimly determined to concentrate on it, and to drive away all distracting thoughts. She forgot about the fudge-party, and an hour went by before she looked up with a sigh, and carefully glancing over her finished pages folded them neatly inside her copy of "Burke's Speeches." All her work was finished, and she could look forward to Sunday with a comfortable

anticipation of unhampered freedom. It was still half an hour before the dressing bell would ring, so she put on her kimono and, her sociable mood having passed, tucked herself up on the window-seat with a book.

In a little while the door opened, and Alma came in to change her frock. Nancy glanced up, and saw in an instant that Alma was annoyed. She felt troubled. It seemed as if every day they were growing farther apart. They no longer had those happy chats together which had bound them close by affection and sympathy. Alma no longer sought her as her confidant, and seemed to resent her advice rather than to seek it. Instead, the younger girl had, as it were, transferred her affection and her admiration to the headstrong and annoyingly self-assured Mildred Lloyd. Mildred had deigned to pronounce Alma pretty, and "interesting," and had "taken her up" as the phrase is, thereby completely turning poor Alma's head so that she was gradually merging even her personality into a pale imitation of Mildred's blasé expressions and mannerisms. Alma was not left ignorant of the fact that Mildred's friendship, like her fancy, was extremely variable, and that she was quite likely to turn a cold shoulder to her new chum, without deigning to provide any reason for doing so. But Alma preferred to believe that in her case Mildred's interest

would not wane, just as she preferred to forget her early prejudice of their first meeting with Mildred.

An uncomfortable little silence reigned, which Nancy pretended to be unaware of, by giving a great deal of attention to her book, although the light from the window was so faint that no human eye could have spelt out the words on the page. But when, at length, she was forced by the lateness of the hour to begin dressing, it was impossible to preserve the wretched silence any longer, or to speak as if nothing were the matter.

"You—you seem worried, Alma," she began hesitatingly. "Is there something on your mind?"

"I'm not worried a bit," returned Alma coldly.

"Well—are you angry about something?"

There was a silence. Alma flung her hair over her shoulder and began to brush the ends vigorously, while Nancy watched the operation with an intentness that showed her mind to be on other things. Presently Alma said in a grave voice:

"I know that it's none of my business, of course, but I *do* think, Nancy, that you are making a mistake."

"A mistake," repeated Nancy, in amazement. "How? How do you mean?"

"Well, it seems to me that as far as you are concerned, it has been simply money wasted to send you here."

"Why, what on earth are you talking about, Alma?" exclaimed Nancy, her temper beginning to rise in spite of her amusement at the fluffy Alma's gravely judicial air. Inasmuch as she studied harder and more seriously than any girl in the school, and rivalled Charlotte in brilliant marks, it was interesting as well as irritating to learn that Alma considered her unsuccessful.

"Well, you know as well as I do that Mother's purpose in sending us here was for us to make friends. There isn't a girl in the school that you show the least interest in, except Charlotte, and Charlotte—well ——" Alma shrugged her shoulders, expressing thereby what she hesitated to put into words. Instantly Nancy flared up. Usually the most even tempered and controlled of girls, she could not keep down her anger when it was roused by Alma's periodic fits of snobbishness.

"What about Charlotte? Why do you shrug your shoulders like that? Because Charlotte isn't considered perfectly 'nice' by Mildred? Because Mildred thinks Charlotte 'rather ordinary—a bit crude, don'tcherknow?' She's the *realest* girl in the school, and everyone of them knows it, too! She's the only one whose mind isn't forever running on beaux and dances and other girls' faults. She's the only one of them who has brains and a heart—she's the only real aristocrat of the whole

lot! She's the only one of them whose friendship I'd give tuppence-ha'penny for ——"

Alma quailed a little under Nancy's indignation —she was indeed a bit ashamed of her snobbish remark; but she did not lower her flag.

"That's no reason why you should let all the other girls know it. We need all the friends we can get, and we can't *afford* to lose this opportunity of making advantageous connections."

This last bit was rather an unfortunate choice of words, smacking as it did just a bit too strongly of Mildred to soothe Nancy's irate ear at just that moment.

"*I* didn't come here to make friends simply for what they could give me—regardless of whether I liked them or not. And I think it's the most *contemptible* thing in the world to toady to girls simply because they are rich or fashionable, and may invite you to parties and things that you can never repay. And it's just that snobbish selfishness—that complete loss of self-respect for the sake of self-interest that makes so many poor people contemptible. I'd rather die before I'd play the rôle of little sister to the rich." Her voice began to quiver, and she had a wretched feeling that she was very near tears—tears not of anger so much as of genuine unhappiness. She felt as if every word she uttered was doing more damage, and her heart ached

because she was quarrelling with Alma, and because Alma was changing more every day. She longed to throw her arms around her sister, and kiss away the memory of every word she had uttered, but stubborn pride, as much a fault with Nancy as a virtue, held her back.

"Do you mean that I'm toadying?" asked Alma, her eyes growing wide. "I know now what you think of me—and I know that you're simply jealous of my fondness for Mildred," she went on passionately. "I don't know what has come over you anyway, Nancy—you don't approve of a single thing I do ——"

"Oh, Alma—darling! How *can* you say such things?" The tears began to roll down Nancy's cheeks. "Whatever put such thoughts into your head, when you *know* how much I love you. It's not me, but you who have changed. Can't you see that I can't let my work go just to play around with a lot of girls who don't care a rap for me, myself? Life isn't a song and a dance for *us,* Alma—and we can't waste our time just for a little popularity with girls who'd forget us to-morrow. Mildred ——"

"Oh, go ahead, and say a lot of mean things about Mildred," interrupted Alma bitterly. "You never liked her. You took a prejudice to her at first sight. You never even tried to know her. I

never heard of anything so unjust in my life! You don't think that anyone is capable of a real friendship but you and Charlotte. Mildred is every bit as good a friend. Just because she's rich you think that she must be selfish—you're the most narrow-minded girl I ever knew. It's the same way with all my friends—you think Frank Barrows is just an idler—a conceited little ——"

"What on earth did I ever say against Frank Barrows?" Nancy defended herself weakly.

"Oh, you never *say* anything. You just look—and I know perfectly well what you think. It seems as if we can never agree about anything, any more. Now, this afternoon you might have been just a little bit sociable—instead of that you shut yourself up, as if you thought all those girls were simply a lot of sillies; but you were able to spend an hour and a half with Charlotte."

"I had to finish my English paper, and that's all there was to it," retorted Nancy. "In any other school under the sun work has to come before play. Neither one of us can afford to take advantage of the leniency of the teachers here—if I did only what they required I wouldn't get to college in ten years. And I've got to get to college, no matter what *Mildred* thinks of me. I'm sorry she doesn't approve of my behavior, but it can't be helped." In her hurt anger, she had lost her head a little bit, or

she would not have thrown that last stone at Alma's chosen friend. For the time being at least, it was impossible to repair the breach that the two wounded, indignant girls had made between each other.

Too sick at heart for tears, too despairingly conscious of the uselessness of any attempt at reconciliation, Nancy began to dress in a miserable silence.

During dinner Nancy made a pretense at eating, but she could not join in the chatter with the other girls. Once or twice Charlotte glanced at her, but with her instinctive gentle tact appeared not to notice Nancy's blues.

At her table, Alma was feverishly gay; as a matter of fact she was on the point of tears. Never before had they had such a quarrel, never before had she seen Nancy so heedlessly angry, never before had they deliberately tried to say things to hurt each other. Waves of desperate homesickness assailed her, and with the memory of happy nights when they had gossiped together in their room at the little brown house, a lump ached in her throat. She wanted Nancy more than anyone else in the world. What was it they had said to each other that had caused such a dreadful coldness between them? She tried to tell herself that Nancy had misjudged her, that Nancy was wrong, and that she

was right in maintaining her ground; but listening to the banter that went on around her, struggling to keep up her own end of it bravely, she felt that not one girl in the room, nor any pleasure in the world was of the slightest value to her so long as she did not have Nancy as her confidant and dearest friend.

With these thoughts battering at the foolish pride in their hearts it would have taken only a whispered word to send the sisters into one another's embrace, but the reconciliation for which they were both longing so piteously was postponed by an incident which threatened to make their quarrel even more serious. It was simply the outcome of an unfortunate chance. For some time both the girls had known that Miss Leland had planned to give them different roommates, since she thought it a good idea for sisters to be separated so that they could make closer friendships with other girls.

After dinner she spoke of this again, not to Nancy but to Alma, leaving it to the younger girl to announce the change to Nancy. She had, of course, no knowledge of their quarrel, nor could she have possibly gauged the unfortunate timing of the change.

Nancy went up to her room directly after dinner, not waiting for the usual hour of music and

dancing, and giving as her excuse the pretense that she had some mending to do.

She did, indeed, get out her work-basket as a sort of defense against unwelcome intrusion, but with a stocking drawn over her hand, she sat with her back to the door, and gave herself up to the sad consolation of tears. In a little while the door opened. Someone came in. Nancy bent over her stocking, and began to run a threadless needle through a "Jacob's-ladder"; from the corner of her eye she saw Alma busily engaged in taking some of her things out of the bureau-drawers. Alma was as painstaking in keeping her own face concealed as Nancy, though she tried to hum a tune under her breath. The silence became intolerable, but diffidence weighted their tongues. Each one of them longed to throw her pride to the winds and sue for a reconciliation; but the fear of having her overtures met with coldness held her back. At length Alma said in a voice which she vainly tried to make natural and casual:

"Miss Leland has changed us. Charlotte Spencer is going to be your roommate from now on—and—and I'm going in with—with Mildred."

"That's—a—a good idea," replied Nancy; sarcasm was a thousand miles from her mind, and she spoke really only for the sake of sounding as if all differences had been forgotten; but a more ill-

chosen sentence could not have fallen from her lips.

"I suppose—you—you're glad to be rid of me," said Alma, her lips quivering. "Anyway, you'll have Charlotte, and she's ever so much more congenial with you than I am."

Nancy did not answer. If Alma had not made that last reference to Charlotte she would have had Nancy back in a moment, but there is a little devil who takes a delight in twisting people's tongues when they most need to be inspired with the right thing to say.

With her night-gown and dressing-gown over her arm, and her sponge-bag in her hand, Alma walked in silence to the door. There she paused, and like Lot's wife flung back at Nancy one piteous parting look, which, alas, met only the back of Nancy's down-bent head. The door closed.

Nancy sprang up, and crossed the room, running, while the spools from her overturned basket rolled off placidly under the bed. Then she paused; pride conquered the tenderness in her heart at that moment, bringing in its trail a sequence of unhappy days.

"No—it won't do to admit I'm wrong. I'm not, and I'll just let her find it out."

And having voiced this stern resolution, she flung herself down on the bed and. burying her face

in the pillows, cried herself into a doze; while, separated from her by a thin partition of lath and plaster, Alma made up her new bed, and bedewed it with her doleful tears.

CHAPTER X

THE OGRE REAPPEARS

"HOPE you haven't forgotten that you've bound yourself in an engagement with me for the theatre to-morrow, Nannie, old dear," called Charlotte from her customary location during leisure hours —namely the piano bench. "I've reserved seats for 'The Countess Betsey'—nice, light, loads of good Viennese tunes—nothing lofty about it. Miss Drinkwater had a cute little plan for us—wanted us to go to hear—or see—I don't know just what the right word is—some production of Euripides in the original. I said 'No'—very politely. Too politely perhaps—I had to repeat it three separate and distinct times. I explained to her that while I just adored Euripides, and loved nothing better than Greek as she is spoke, my constitution craved something a bit gayer than 'Medea'—in the original. I hinted modestly that I'd been overworking a bit lately—and that my mighty brain needed something that it didn't have to chew eighty-five times before swallowing. Aren't you going to thank me?"

"Oh, I do—thanks *horribly,*" laughed Nancy. "Can't you see us sitting through a merry little Greek play, trying to weep in the right places, and not to laugh when everyone but the villainess had been stabbed or poisoned or fed to the lions?"

"Gee—but couldn't we be lofty when we got back?" said Charlotte. "I'd say, 'How sublime were those lines in Act II, Scene 4, where, in a voice thrilling with sublime hate, the frenzied woman shrieks "Logos Nike anthropos Socrates!"' And you would glow with fervor, and say *'Zoue mou sas agapo.'* I tell you what, when it comes to dead languages——"

"It's too late, I hope, for you to get enthusiastic about the idea now," interrupted Nancy, firmly. "It wouldn't be a bit unlike you to get so carried away with it, that you'd suddenly change your mind about not going—and I'll tell you right now, that if you do I am emphatically *not* with you. I don't like to improve my mind when I'm on a holiday—and Saturdays come only once a week."

"You should thirst for every opportunity to improve your understanding," reproved Charlotte, who could chatter away like a magpie, while her nimble fingers never lost a note, or stumbled in the rhythm of the lively dance tune she was playing.

"Don't forget *our* little party, Alma," said Mildred Lloyd. "Mademoiselle is going to chaperone

us—I asked her yesterday. We're going in on the eleven-fifty-four, and the boys are going to meet us at Delmonico's at one."

Charlotte cast a sidelong glance at Nancy; she understood that Alma possessed all this information already, and that Mildred was making the announcement simply to excite the other girls' curiosity.

Since their quarrel Alma and Nancy, chiefly for the sake of outward appearances, had called an armistice. But while Nancy had not confided the first hint of the quarrel to Charlotte, poor Alma, who could never smother anything in her own heart, had unbosomed herself completely to Mildred. Needless to say, Mildred, who had disliked Nancy from the beginning, was not warmed toward her by any of the details in Alma's narrative that concerned herself. She knew that Alma had not told Nancy about their arrangements to go to the theatre, meeting two boys in town, of whom Frank Barrows was to be Alma's cavalier; and consequently, she surmised, quite correctly, that Nancy would be hurt when she spoke about the plan.

Alma shot a quick, uncertain look at her sister, and blushed; but Nancy only smiled, and asked, casually:

"What are you going to see?"

Alma's expression changed to one of relief.

"'Oh, Trixie!' Aren't we, Mildred?"

"Uh-huh. Everyone says it's a scream, and the music is perfect. I wanted to go to a regular play, but then I thought the boys would like a musical comedy better. By the way, Alma, I think I'll ask Miss Leland to let us go in on the ten-fourteen—I want to do some shopping. It'll get us in at eleven, and we'll have two hours. I promised Madame Lepage that I'd come in to talk over a dress I want for the holidays—and then I've simply got to get a new hat."

The following morning, after the first study period, which closed the labors of the day at nine-thirty, Nancy heard a timid knock at the door. It was Alma, gloved and bonneted in her "Sunday-best," but with an agitated expression that was ill-suited to her festive appearance. It was the first time that she had seen Nancy alone since the night of their quarrel.

"Oh, Charlotte's not here, is she?" she said, evidently much relieved.

"No, she walked up to the village to post a letter. We aren't going in until the eleven-fifty-four. Did you want to see her?"

"No, oh, no. You see, I—I——" Alma stammered, turning scarlet, and fidgeting nervously with the button on her glove. "You see, I wondered if you could lend me—lend me just a little bit of

money. I—I'll pay it right back. You see, I don't want Mildred—I mean this is a sort of Dutch treat ——"

"Why, of course," laughed Nancy, touched and a little bit hurt by Alma's embarrassment. Heretofore they had borrowed and lent to each other without the thought of explaining why they needed the money, and her sister's constraint marked with painful clearness her sense of the coldness between them. "How much do you want?"

"Could you lend me—ten dollars? Or seven would do. I won't use it all, of course, but—but it's better to have it."

Ten dollars was a good bit more than either of the girls had spent on any pleasure before the Porterbridges' dance; but Nancy said nothing, and going to her top bureau drawer, took out her pocketbook and gave Alma the bill without a second glance into the purse.

"Oh, *thank* you—oh, Nancy!" Alma looked into her sister's face, and the tears came suddenly to her eyes.

"Goodness, you don't have to thank me like that," said Nancy, flushing. "You know that it's no more my money than yours, dear ——"

"You're—you're so good to me, Nancy—oh—I didn't mean ——" and all at once Alma, who could restrain her sweet impulses no more easily than her

weak ones, flung her arms around Nancy, and burst out crying. "Oh, darling Nancy, don't be angry with me any more. I can't bear it!"

"Alma, dearest—I'm *not* angry—oh, I'm so glad—so glad!" cried Nancy, in tears, too; they clung together fiercely, every hard word forgotten in the joy of "making up."

"There, darling, you'll miss your train. There now, it's all just as it was. Oh, see, your hat's all over your eye"—they began to laugh tremulously. "You'd better put a little cold water on your face, sweetheart—and dust a little powder over it."

They hugged each other again, and, as Alma ran down the hall, Nancy stood at the door watching her, with brighter eyes than she had had for a week. But when Alma had disappeared below the landing of the stairs, she walked back into the room with a sober expression.

A quarter of an hour later she went again to the top bureau drawer to get out her gloves, and then thinking for the first time of the amount of money she had left herself, realized that she could have barely sufficient, if that, to defray her expenses of her own day in town. Each of the girls had taken fifteen dollars to last them as pocket money up until Thanksgiving—a little she had already spent on shoe-laces, ribbons and so on, and she had given Alma ten. A glance into her purse showed her to

her dismay that she had left herself exactly fifty-four cents. She knew, of course, that she could easily borrow from Charlotte, but this she was absolutely unwilling to do, first because she did not want to have to write to her mother for more money, and secondly because she did not want to do anything that she would not have Alma do. To borrow from Charlotte was one thing, but to have Alma follow her precedent was unwise; for in the first place, Alma would borrow from Mildred Lloyd or Kay Leonard, and in the second place, Alma might not know just where to set her limits. Nancy dropped the purse, and shut the drawer quietly. After all, she told herself, she had not deprived herself of so much pleasure that she should pity herself. It was a beautiful day, clear and sparkling, and she would enjoy herself just as much on a walk across country as at the "Countess Betsey." Nancy had the happy faculty of banishing any regrets for a pleasure which she could not reasonably take, and finding a substitute for it with perfect cheerfulness. The prospect of a free day, which she could spend as she liked, was as full of attraction for her as her original plan for the matinée had been, and when Charlotte strolled in upon her, she was whistling softly as she pulled on her scarlet tam-o'-shanter.

"Listen, Charlotte—don't kill me—but I'm

afraid I've got to stay here after all. Do you mind awfully?" Naturally she could not give the reasons for her default on the theatre party; and because she had forgotten to think up a plausible excuse she flushed slightly.

"Oh, come now!" howled Charlotte in dismay. "You can't do anything like that. There's not an earthly reason why you should stay here, and you know it." Then quickly her singularly delicate tact warned her not to press Nancy. The very fact that her friend had not given a reason for breaking their engagement was enough for Charlotte to know that she should not ask for one. The two girls understood each other so well that they knew instinctively when to respect one another's silences.

"Well, if you can't, you can't, I suppose," she said quietly. "I'm awfully sorry; but we can go in next Saturday. If you have anything to do, however, there's no point in my staying around out here. I'll go on in anyway. Do you want me to get anything for you?"

"Not a thing," replied Nancy, feeling an intense gratitude toward Charlotte for not disputing her decision with her. "I'm glad you are going."

"Well, sit down and talk to me while I'm dressing. Alma's gone, hasn't she?"

"Yes. Oh, wear your brown hat, Charlotte—the one with the little feather on it."

"My dear, what does it matter—Drinkwater won't appreciate it."

"Doesn't matter. You'll be a thing of beauty whether she knows it or not, and that's reason enough for wearing it."

"Want me to bring out a pound of those scrumptious soft chocolates from Mailliards? Then we can have a regular festival on 'em to-night, if you're a good girl while I'm gone."

When Charlotte had taken her departure, Nancy, who had walked over to the station with her, struck out through the village for a good walk before luncheon. The country beyond Broadmore was picturesque, and Nancy loved nothing better than to swing along without plan or purpose, cutting across a field here, or turning into a bit of glowing woodland there, as her fancy prompted. In her short full skirt, her small feet laced into sturdy low-heeled boots, she could negotiate fences and brooks with the freedom of a boy, revelling in a feeling of adventurousness and liberty. The sun had melted the frost of the early morning, the ground was soft, and the air mild though bracing. In the wide puddles which had gathered in the depressions of the country roads, a sky mottled with huge, lazy clouds was reflected. A cock crowed on some distant haystack. Now and then a mischievous wind rose, bending the long brown grass as it swept

along, and making Nancy catch her breath in a sort of jubilant excitement, as it blew into her face, and spun out wisps of her hair behind her.

She had turned after about two miles of walking, and was approaching the pike on the school side of the railroad station, when she heard behind her the patient creaking of the old hack, and the familiar clucking of the driver to his lean and melancholy steed. As it came beside her, she glanced up curiously; then her eyes grew round, and she stared in incredulous amazement. For, bolt upright on the decrepit back seat, his head erect under its wide-brimmed black felt hat, his thin hands folded on the crook of his cane, sat—her Uncle Thomas. She lacked breath to speak to him; but just then he turned his eyes and saw her. For a moment he merely gazed at her without a glimmer of recognition and she had half persuaded herself that his brief visit to the cottage had not been long enough to have fixed her features in his mind, when his face suddenly broke into an almost boyish smile.

"Hey, driver—stop! Whoa! Why, my dear child—bless me, this is very fortunate!" With one foot on the step, he leaned out and clasped her hand. "Get in, get in, my dear—I was on my way to see you. And I nearly missed you, eh?" Nancy clambered up beside him, and the driver, not re-

ceiving any orders to the contrary, clucked to his steed, which continued on its interrupted way.

"Were you really going to visit us, Uncle?" asked Nancy. "It's a pity that Alma isn't here. She went in to the city—and it was just luck that I didn't go, too." She smiled to herself, wondering if, after all, Providence had had some hand in the events of the morning which had kept her where she was.

"Luck? Well, I should say so. I'd have been badly disappointed if my surprise had fallen through," chuckled Uncle Thomas, who was evidently in the best of spirits. "Well, well—you're as ruddy as a ripe pomegranate, my dear."

"I've just walked four miles," said Nancy.

"Walked? By yourself? Now, that's a taste you've inherited from me. Fond of walking, aren't you? Now, tell me how you are getting along—at school, I mean. Like it, eh?" He looked at her keenly, a twinkle hiding just under the surface of his gray eyes.

"Yes, I like it. I'm working awfully hard—I have to, or I wouldn't get anywhere, because it would be awfully easy to loaf at Miss Leland's," laughed Nancy; she had a feeling that he was waiting to get her opinion of the school, and she was afraid of sounding priggish, or as if she were trying to impress him with an idea of her industry.

So she chatted away about the girls, telling him about Charlotte particularly, describing the teachers, giving him an account of the routine, and so on, to all of which he listened as intently as if he were her father.

"So you're swimming along. Good. And how is my other niece? Is she working very hard? Has she made lots of friends, eh?" Again Nancy felt that he was pumping her, but she told him casually about Alma, taking care to say nothing that might sound as if she said it for effect, and he listened, nodding his head, and smiling.

"Well, now—even if we can't have Alma with us, what do you say to giving up a holiday to an old gentleman? Is that too much to ask? The whim took me to run over here to-day and kidnap my two nieces; but if I can only have one, I'll take her, if she'll let me. Will your 'schoolma'am' let you come away with me? I'd like to have you until to-morrow, and I'll get you back safe and sound."

Nancy laughed. Six months before, if anyone had told her that she would be going to visit her Uncle Thomas on that particular day, she would have thought the prophet quite mad; as it was she could hardly believe her ears.

"I'd *love* to do it. Here's the school now—it won't take me a minute to get ready. You speak

to Miss Leland, Uncle Thomas. I'm quite sure that I can go."

A little more than an hour later Nancy found herself turning in the very old gate through the unfriendly bars of which she and Alma had peered on that distant rainy afternoon, feeling that they were gazing into a forbidden country. Yet now nothing, it seemed, could be more natural than that she should be sitting beside her uncle, chatting away with him unconstrainedly. Only the fact that he never mentioned her mother, nor suggested that she should even peep into the little brown house, made her feel uncomfortable. Furthermore, he showed the same coldness on the subject of Alma, so that, in a way, Nancy felt that somehow she had almost unfairly won his affection for herself alone, and that she was enjoying a pleasure in which her mother and sister should have had an equal share. On the other hand, she decided, at length, to say nothing either to Alma or to Mrs. Prescott about her visit; only because she was afraid that the knowledge of it might again lead them to false hopes, and to follies stimulated by those hopes. She felt sure that her uncle had come to see her, only because he had taken her at her word; that is to say, that he counted on her not in any way misunderstanding the purpose of his visit, or fancying that it gave promise of his relenting in his long-

standing determination not to solve their financial problems for them.

Aside from the fact that, although within a mile of the little brown cottage, she might have been a league away, and that she experienced several bad qualms of homesickness, Nancy thoroughly enjoyed that day. She lunched with her uncle in the big dining-room, sitting at the head of his table, while he placed himself at the foot. And afterwards he showed her about the huge old house, taking her to his laboratory, explaining a great deal about scientific experiments which she did not understand, showing her his books and his curios. As they passed along the corridor on the second floor, he paused a moment outside a room which was closed. Then as if on a sudden impulse, he took a key out of his pocket, and opened the door, without saying anything. It was a small room, rather bare, furnished with an almost Spartan simplicity; the sunlight beamed in, striking its full, red rays on the faded wall above the narrow, white iron bed, over which hung a picture of a lion-hunt, evidently cut out of some book or magazine—just such a picture as would strike the imagination of a lad of twelve. The rest of the wall was mottled with other pictures, many of them unframed, clipped out of colored newspapers, and fixed to the wall-paper with pins; pictures of horses and steeple-chases, and

Greek athletes, and American heroes; one, the largest, was a vivid representation of the Battle of Trafalgar, showing a perfect inferno of red and yellow flames and bursting bombs, and splintered ships, and drowning sailors clinging to planks and spars. On the table between the windows stood a row of books, a few ill-treated looking lesson books hobnobbing like poor relations with other more self-confident works on "Woodcraft" and "Adventure." The mantelpiece was burdened with a heterogeneous collection of boyish knickknacks, such as a sling, a bird's-nest, a rusty bowie-knife, and a decrepit old horse-pistol.

For a moment Nancy looked about her in astonishment, then, as she understood, the tears came to her eyes, and she looked up at her uncle. The room had not been changed since her father had left it for boarding-school, twenty, thirty years before. Mr. Prescott said nothing; but after a moment closed the door, locked it again, and walked away.

"I'm going to have visitors for tea," he remarked, to turn the subject. "It's quite an eventful day for me; I rarely see anyone, as you know. But I thought that it might be pleasant for you to renew an acquaintance with a lady who seems to have taken a great fancy to you, and who, incidentally, is the only woman I know who has a full-

sized allowance of common sense. Though at times she is very unreasonable and quite as inconsistent as any of her sex."

Nancy looked at him inquiringly, and he explained:

"Miss Elizabeth Bancroft." Whether he considered Miss Bancroft in the plural, as being a lady of many parts, or whether he had used the word "visitors" because she would be accompanied or followed by others, and if so how many others he expected he did not trouble himself to make clear; but the matter explained itself, when toward five o'clock, the sound of carriage wheels rattled out on the gravel drive, and in due time, Miss Bancroft laboriously descended from her equipage, assisted by her nephew, George Arnold.

"My dear child, how delightful this is! I'm so really glad to see you," exclaimed Miss Bancroft, taking Nancy's hands in both her own, as if she had known her all her life. Her frank cordial manner sent a glow of pleasure to Nancy's cheeks. "I hope you remember that you met my nephew—for his sake. The idea that you might possibly have forgotten him has been troubling his vanity for a good eight hours."

Nancy laughingly murmuring that she did remember Mr. Arnold, and blushing with shyness, shook hands with him. She noticed, without

dreaming of connecting the fact with herself, that he seemed to be in remarkably good spirits, and that they quite overflowed when he told her how nice it was to see her again, and what a jolly, funny sort of party the whole thing was anyway.

"I wasn't going to bring George," observed Miss Bancroft. "He's usually so tiresomely lazy about tearing himself away from his books or his own company, that I thought I wouldn't bother him to-day. Then lo, and behold, he gets into an unbearable fit of sulks, complains that I'm always ready enough to drag him around with people who bore him to death, and leave him alone whenever anyone interesting turns up—in a word goes into a tantrum, and all but weeps with rage, so I had to bring him." With that she indulged in a chuckle of mischievous laughter, and patted Nancy's cheek.

A big wood-fire crackled noisily inside the huge stone chimney place in the living-room, and around it they all gathered in that comfortable, sociable spirit which is the characteristic mood for tea-time; everyone felt that they had really known everyone else rather longer than they had, and while Miss Bancroft poured out their tea, and chattered away with Uncle Thomas, who stood upright on the hearth-rug, drinking his tea from the mantelpiece, Nancy and Mr. Arnold chatted away as if it were impossible to say everything they wanted to in the

course of one short hour or so. As a rule Nancy had a very hard time overcoming her shyness when she had to talk to a young man. She always felt that she might say something that they wouldn't understand, or which they might think affected or priggish—which were the two last sins in the world which she would have wished to be accused of, or with which anyone could accuse her. But with Mr. Arnold, she lost every atom of self-consciousness. He had travelled a great deal, and he had seen the world through a prism of mingled humor and sensitiveness, which gave his conversation the charm of a very original viewpoint on everything. He told her droll stories about his school days in England and Switzerland; recounted innumerable anecdotes about the various people he had seen, many of whom were celebrated for their brains or their follies; and altogether managed to make an hour shorter than many a minute. And in some way, while he talked, he had a way of flattering the shy young girl not by words, but by a hundred indescribable little attentions, paid unconsciously, no doubt, and simply because he was thoroughly delighted to see her again.

"My dear, you mustn't fail to pay me a visit during the holidays," Miss Bancroft urged. "Remember that your father was a very great favorite of mine—and I should like to be a favorite of

yours, if Uncle Thomas doesn't supplant me, quite."

The old lady bent and kissed Nancy warmly as she prepared to take her departure.

When the carriage had driven away Nancy and her uncle sat before the fire for a long time. To remember that afternoon was always a delight to Nancy; and she particularly liked to recall the memory of sitting there, as the dusk grew deeper in the room and the daylight faded away into pale tints, and then into a deep, quiet blue, while they sat and watched the fire. The flames had died down, but the long logs were wrapped in a hot, red glow, and every now and then they would pop softly and a spark would drop down into the ruddy embers.

When dinner was over they sat by that fireside until bedtime, chatting away with a thoroughly delightful sense of camaraderie.

Absolutely forgetting her mother and sister's ground of interest in Uncle Thomas, Nancy talked to him quite freely about her ambitions without the slightest feeling of constraint, impressing him unconsciously more than she could have done by the most fervid protestations with her sincerely eager wish to make her life for herself and by herself. And he liked her earnest, youthful spirit of independence, perfectly innocent of any pose of "strong-mindedness"—which to a man like Mr.

Prescott would have constituted one of the most unforgivable of feminine failings, ranking equally with the other extreme, of which poor, pretty, helpless Mrs. Prescott was an example.

"So you want to work your way through college? What's the idea?" he asked a bit gruffly. "A pretty girl like you, I should think, would only be planning to marry and settle down in a home of her own."

Nancy colored.

"That would be awfully nice, but one can't make it a business, Uncle Thomas, or all the niceness would go out of it. I think one ought to plan out all the difficult things, and leave all the—the dreadfully nice things to Chance, or Providence,—or—well, just let them happen where they belong."

"You're a little Madame Solomon, aren't you, eh?" said Uncle Thomas with a short chuckle. "And how are you going to work your way through college? I shouldn't think that Miss Leland's would be exactly the place for a young lady with your ideas."

"It wouldn't be, if I aired them all over the place—but I've learned to keep my ideas to myself," said Nancy, thinking how Mildred Lloyd would scoff at her "highbrow" ambitions. Uncle Thomas shot a quick, keen glance at her from under his bushy brows.

"Well, you *are* a wise young lady. Now, who in the world taught you that—to keep your ideas to yourself? Eh?"

"Why, there's nothing very wise in that," said Nancy, surprised at his tone of warm approval. "I know what I want, and if I'm with people who think it's a foolish thing to want, why, I don't talk about it—that's all."

"Well, my dear, permit me to say that I think that in time you are going to have even more sense than my good Elizabeth."

"You—you aren't laughing at me, Uncle Thomas? Do you think I'm trying to show off?" asked Nancy timidly, unwilling to believe his sincere praise; and she looked anxiously and shyly into his face to detect a smile if there was one. But there wasn't.

"Laughing at you? My dear child—what nonsense! Bless my soul, but you are certainly my boy's daughter!"

Then, after a short silence, and just as Nancy was on the point of telling him an amusing little incident about Charlotte, he interrupted her abruptly and irrelevantly:

"I say,—you like that young man, eh?"

"What young man?" gasped Nancy, turning scarlet.

"*That* young man," repeated Uncle Thomas, pet-

tishly. "Elizabeth's boy—Arnold—that author-person."

"Author?"

"Yes. Bless me, didn't he tell you how famous he is? Do you like him, I say?" Uncle Thomas was quite fierce.

"Why, yes. I think he's awfully nice. I—I don't know him very well," said Nancy, in astonishment.

"Hum. Well, he's a nice fellow. Clever chap. Elizabeth dotes on him, but he doesn't let her think for him. But he's not good enough for you. You go along to college. If you won't get any silly notions about marrying and all that nonsense, I—I'll —well, maybe I'll give you a lift here and there, though it's strictly against my principles." After which involved and very cryptic remark Uncle Thomas stiffly offered her his cheek to kiss, and sent her to bed.

CHAPTER XI

ALMA MAKES COMPLICATIONS

CHARLOTTE was sitting in the easy chair which she had imported to her new lodging with the rest of her belongings, munching peanuts. Her bushy brown hair was pinned up into a droll little "nubbin" on top of her head, her goggles had slipped down almost to the tip of her nose, and altogether her attitude, when Nancy burst in upon her late on Sunday afternoon, gave evidence that she was in a thoughtful mood. She had often said that peanuts always disposed her to meditation. With her feet on the window-seat she gazed out upon a rather dreary scene of fog and rain, hardly blinking her big, heavy-lidded eyes, and devouring peanuts like an automaton. But the unchanging gravity of her face, as she turned around to greet her prodigal roommate, told Nancy that there was really some serious matter on her friend's mind.

"Hello! Have a good time?" was her only greeting.

"Very. Did you like the play yesterday? I—I hope you understood why I—I mean after I had told you that I had to stay here ——"

"Nancy, you know you don't have to explain anything to me. If you couldn't go with me, don't you suppose that I knew that you had your own reasons for not going?" interrupted Charlotte warmly. "My idea of real 'bosom friends,' as they call 'em, is of two people who know when not to bother each other with questions.

"The reason why most of these ardent schoolgirl friendships come to violent deaths is because they *will* insist on telling each other everything, and demanding an explanation for every why and wherefore. And that's that. Take off your things and have a peanut—or even two, if you like."

Nancy tossed her hat on the bed and began to take off her heavy clothes.

"You seemed sort of grave, Charlotte, when I came in. Has anything happened?" she asked, as she slipped into her dressing-gown and shook down her hair.

"Well, in a way, yes," replied Charlotte. "Nothing to worry you really, and it's really not my affair, except that it concerns you and Alma. It's only that I'm afraid that that donkey Mildred Lloyd got Alma into rather a scrape yesterday. Oh, don't look so scared—it's all fixed up. Only, if I were you, I'd have a good talk with Alma about Mildred."

"But what happened?" cried Nancy, who had turned quite pale, in spite of Charlotte's hasty reassurances.

"Well, the chief trouble was that they overstayed their time in town yesterday. Ten o'clock is the very latest that any of us can come in on a holiday, as you know, and as they knew, and as that little pinhead, Mademoiselle, knew. It seems that one of the boys persuaded them to stay in for dinner and to go to the theatre again afterwards. So they didn't get in until after twelve. Well, as you can imagine, Amelia went on a regular rampage. And I've a notion that she was a good deal harder on poor Alma than she was on Mildred. Amelia is more afraid of angering Mildred than Mildred is of angering her. Mildred always takes Mademoiselle as her chaperone because she is quite sure of being able to make that little poodle do anything she wants. And Mildred, being the daughter of Marshall Lloyd, is *persona grata* here, and can wriggle out of any scrape. I know Mildred down to the ground. I've roomed with her for a year. For some reason or other she never tried to coax me into any rule breaking—probably because we were never intimate at all, and because she knew that I don't think there's any fun or sense in that sort of thing. It doesn't take any great cleverness to break a rule, and you don't get anything much by doing

so. If you want my opinion, I think that Mildred is a very unsafe sort of friend for a girl like Alma. I don't believe that Alma honestly likes her—Mildred is more than inclined to be a bully, and extremely capricious—but somehow a lot of girls feel flattered when Mildred 'takes them up,' and will do anything she tells them to, without using their own common sense for a minute. I'm saying all this to you, Nancy, when I wouldn't say it to anyone else. I don't like the idea of picking to pieces a girl whom you roomed with for a year, but I think that both of us ought to try to make Alma open her eyes before Mildred gets her into any more mischief."

Nancy sat silent for a time, staring out of the window, and biting her finger thoughtfully. She longed to ask Charlotte's advice, but she hesitated to discuss her own sister even with this very close and sincere friend. She hated to admit Alma's weaknesses even to herself, and she could not bring herself to speak of them to anyone else. But she felt very uncertain as to how she was going to approach Alma on the subject of her friendship with Mildred; for in spite of their reconciliation, she knew that Alma was not ready to take any warnings, without flying up with a lot of notions about the nobility of friendship and so on; true and idealistic notions in themselves, but so unwisely applied that

she stood in danger of losing them altogether through disillusionment.

"I think Alma's alone now. Have you seen her?" said Charlotte. "The poor little creature has been awfully unhappy about the scolding Miss Leland gave her—Mildred wasn't at all cast down and goes around looking as if she had done something very smart. The very fact that Alma is feeling so blue about it all, while Mildred is perfectly unconcerned, shows the difference in the sort of stuff they are made of. And we must take care that Alma doesn't change under Mildred's influence so that she, too, will think it very smart to get into silly scrapes just for the fun of getting out of them."

Nancy sprang up, and without a word left the room.

There was no light in her sister's room, but in the gray twilight that shone in forlornly she made out a pathetic little heap on the bed. She felt a lump of pity and motherly tenderness rise in her throat; not a particle of blame was in her heart—only a desire to cuddle and comfort her thoughtless little sister.

"Alma," she called softly. A tousled head was lifted from the pillow, and even in the dim light she could see how Alma's rosy, childlike face was stained and swollen with tears.

"Oh, Nancy! I *am* so glad you're back! Oh, don't be angry with me. You aren't angry, are you?" sobbed Alma.

"Angry!" echoed Nancy, laughing tremulously. "Oh, you poor little darling—don't be so unhappy about it all." She hugged Alma tightly and kissed her hot cheek, feeling the tears on it.

"Then you *do* know about it. It wasn't my fault, Nancy—that is, it wasn't Milly's, either. Don't think I'm trying to shift the blame. Oh, I have been so *miserable.*"

"Why, dearest, it wasn't anything very bad—it was only foolish. Cheer up!"

"You see,—you see—Frank was there, and another boy—and they hated to go back to Cambridge—and it all seemed perfectly harmless—and Milly said it was perfectly all right, and that Miss Leland wouldn't care a bit—and that she had often done it. I hadn't any idea—until I thought about you, and I knew you wouldn't like it. But I didn't think about that until we were coming home. But Milly just laughed."

"What did Miss Leland say to you?"

"She—she was furious. She said that she was ashamed of me, and that she was going to write to Mother—and that it was a cheap, common thing to do."

Nancy's eyes blazed. For a moment she sat per-

fectly still, breathing sharply, evidently trying to conquer her temper. Then she said in a quiet tone:

"She had no business to say that to you. I'm going to speak to her after dinner."

"Oh, don't, Nancy," implored Alma, timidly. "It's all right now. I—I don't want you to say anything to Miss Leland."

"Well, she should have been ashamed of herself to say that to you. She is nothing but a horrid old snob—I'll wager she thought twice over everything she said to Mildred." Nancy's eyes were still fiery. She was beginning to taste the humiliation of having to submit to the tyranny of snobs. If she went to Miss Leland it would end most likely by their having, for the sake of their pride, to pack up and go home. And she felt that she had no right to do anything that would so wound her mother.

"Alma, dearest, I want to say something to you —please don't you be angry with me now. Please, dearest. You know that I haven't a single thought that isn't for your interest—and that I wouldn't for anything on earth try to take away from you anything that was really for your good." She paused, waiting for Alma to say something, but her sister was silent, and the room was too dim now for her to read the expression on Alma's face.

"I think that you have already seen for yourself that there is danger in a friendship where one per-

son lacks a—well, a very keen sense of honor, and the other lacks judgment. I know you don't want to make any more mistakes—you have been very unhappy over a small one, and unless you are wise, big ones may follow."

"You mean—you want me to—to not be friends with Mildred?"

"I want you only to be independent, dear, so that you won't be afraid to do what you know is right and wise, even if she laughs at you and coaxes you. I don't like to criticize Mildred to you if you are very fond of her; but you know that I have never trusted her, and this affair ought to show you, too, that she isn't to be trusted. She has always had her own way, and she isn't a wise girl. She hasn't been a very good influence for you, as you must have seen. Partly because of her influence we quarrelled, you know. She has laughed you out of doing many things that you know well you should have done. I am not blaming you, Alma. It is only because I know that in time Mildred would make you very, very unhappy that I'm telling you not to make her your closest friend."

"She—she—I mean that in many ways she should be a very *good* friend to have," began Alma, in a low voice.

"Oh, Alma darling, you mustn't think that simply because a girl has money and position and influ-

ence that she is, on the face of that, a valuable friend. A girl like Mildred is very fickle, anyway. To-day she may want to do everything in the world for you, and to-morrow she may hardly speak to you. So long as you follow her blindly, she may show a great fancy for you, but if you were to follow your own ideas, contrary to her, she would quarrel with you in a minute."

"I don't believe that of Mildred," exclaimed Alma, with sudden defiance. "You have no idea how generous she is, and—and how broad-minded. I'm sure that you are prejudiced against her, Nancy. I know that she often appears to be rather a snob, but in reality she isn't one at all. Yesterday was no more her fault than it was mine. I was just as wrong as she was."

"Yes, but you were unhappy because you had done it, and Mildred isn't unhappy about it at all—as a matter of fact, she thinks that it was quite a clever thing to do."

Alma was silent. Then she said, presently:

"I can't quarrel with her."

"You don't have to quarrel with her. I never asked you to do that. I said only to think and act as you know to be right. Certainly, then, if she grows cool with you, she will respect you more. I —I hate to see my sister so absolutely a—a—I mean I hate to see you doing blindly everything

Mildred does. Because she thinks it silly and 'high-brow' to study hard, you don't study. I hate to see you so afraid to lose a friend that you will go against your own conscience and judgment just to keep her good-will. It's just—snobbery, Alma—and it's worse than even Mildred's snobbery, because it's cowardly, while hers is just—impudent."

"I won't let you say such things, Nancy," cried Alma, shaking off her sister's hand. "I—I couldn't go on rooming with Mildred if I believed what you say of her, and I won't listen to you."

"Oh, Alma—don't, *don't* let us quarrel again," pleaded Nancy. "Why can't you believe that it's almost unbearably hard for me to say these things to you? I am a coward, too, because I'm so afraid of losing one little jot of your affection, that I would rather a thousand times hold my tongue than say anything to make you angry. But I can't be silent."

"You've made me more unhappy now than I was before," said Alma, sullenly. "Do you want me to be a hypocrite, and pretend to be fond of Mildred still, while I'm believing what you want me to believe of her?"

Nancy got up, feeling quite desperate about the failure of her attempts to show Alma her danger. While she was thinking of something to say she walked over to the door and switched on the light.

Just as she turned, she saw Alma make a quick movement—but Alma was not quick enough to grasp a handsome fur neck-piece off the chair and whisk it behind the pillow before Nancy saw her. Alma blushed crimson. If it had not been for that swift action and the guilty blush, Nancy would not even have noticed the scarf—or, if she had, she would simply have thought that it was one of Mildred's. For some reason she flushed herself, and stood staring blankly at Alma, curiously ashamed of Alma's own guilty expression. Then Alma slowly drew the scarf from its hiding-place, and tried to laugh.

"You're going to scold me for my extravagance now, Nancy. I—I got this to-day. I was hiding it, because I didn't—I mean I was afraid you might read me a lecture." She attempted an air of playful penitence, but it was rather a failure. It was a very expensive fur, long and fluffy, and beautifully lined with frilled chiffon.

"But—Alma," remonstrated Nancy, weakly, "how did you get it? It must have cost at least a hundred dollars. Why ——" She broke off quite dazed and frightened at the thought of such a sum, and stared at her sister as if she thought that Alma had taken leave of her senses.

"Well, you see—don't worry, Nancy," stammered Alma, evidently finding the greatest difficulty

in explaining. "You see—it was this way. Milly—oh, Nancy,"—she stopped and looked at her sister beseechingly,—"Milly *wanted* me to get it. And she offered to lend me the money—she begged me to let her lend it to me, and I can pay her back whenever I please; she said she didn't care whether I paid her back at all. And I felt so shabby in that old suit of mine, and I hated to look badly when Frank was going to be there—he knows ever so much about girls' clothes, and I *did* look positively poor beside Mildred. I knew Mother wouldn't mind—in fact, I knew that it would hurt her pride dreadfully if I didn't look respectable with those sort of people—and the fur made everything else look just right. Oh, Nancy, if you only knew how it *hurts* me to be with girls who have everything, who look so much nicer than I do just because they have prettier clothes. I know it was wrong of me, but *I couldn't resist it!* I just simply couldn't."

Nancy bit her lip. It seemed as if she were always being thrust into a position where she must needs be forever preaching to Alma. It made her feel old, and uncomfortably burdened. With Alma she always felt somewhat as a staid and wise old duenna must feel with a pretty and charmingly unpractical and mischievous charge. For a moment she was on the point of shrugging her shoulders and determining to let Alma go ahead as she

pleased. She had no desire to blame Alma; she understood too well the force of the temptations that surrounded a girl like Alma in such an environment as Miss Leland's school; and she was touched by Alma's, "If you knew how it *hurts* me!" She had foreseen just that when she had urged her mother not to send them to Miss Leland's. She herself had felt that very same sharp flick of wounded feminine pride when she compared her own small possessions with those of the other girls and realized that in spite of the neatness of her clothes they must often appear plain to the point of poorness in comparison with Mildred's or Kay's. Somehow with Charlotte, in spite of Charlotte's pretty things, she had not been so conscious of the contrast.

"I—I wish you hadn't tried to hide it from me, Alma," she said gently. "Are you *afraid* of me? Am I always scolding you?"

"Nancy! Of course not," cried Alma, in distress. "I didn't mean to hide it—that was horribly cowardly—I *knew* that it was weak of me to get it, and that I had no right to borrow the money from Mildred; and you have a perfect right to blame me awfully."

"But, dear, how*ever* are we going to manage to pay her back? How much was it?"

Alma looked uncomfortable.

"It really was a bargain, Nancy. A—a hundred and ten, marked down from a hundred and forty. It'll last me forever."

"A hundred and ten!" Nancy gasped, and then tried to compose her features so as not to scare Alma with her own breathless dismay.

"I—I don't have to pay her until I get ready," murmured Alma. "I know Milly won't even think of it again."

"You can't possibly accept it as a present, Alma," said Nancy sternly. "We must manage to pay Mildred back somehow—soon. She is the last person in the world whom I'd want to owe anything to. I mean to say, that people in our position *can't* put themselves under obligations to a girl like Mildred Lloyd. It's different if you can return it in some other way. For instance, it would be all right for Kay Leonard to accept an expensive present from Mildred, because she could so easily return it, but for one of us to is like accepting a charity."

Alma looked at her repentantly out of two large, grave blue eyes.

"I—I'm afraid I rather made a mess of everything yesterday, Nancy," she said, hanging her head and picking at the soft fur, which somehow had lost a good deal of its charm for her; then, all at once, evidently touched by the droll naïveté of the sad remark, Nancy burst out laughing.

"You poor, funny lamb! I'm always worrying you to death," she said. "Don't bother any more, Alma. I'm sick of bothering, myself. We'll manage to solve the problem somehow. Only, dearest," she grew sober again, "please—please don't—I don't want to say it again,—but think over what I said to you. I'm sure that you will see that I'm very nearly right. Come, now—you'd better tidy yourself. I'm going to dress." She bent over Alma and kissed her lightly. As she went toward the door Mildred met her. They looked at each other coolly, Mildred barely giving her a nonchalant nod, and then ignoring her altogether.

"Hello, honey-pie. Don't tell me you've been weeping briny tears all afternoon over what Leland said to you," she cried gaily to Alma. "Goodness, what a penitent! What's the point in having a good time if you're going to regret it like that? I have the right idea—I make it a point never to regret anything."

Nancy walked slowly back to her own room, and dressed for dinner in silence. It seemed to her that she might indeed be "sick of bothering," but that did not prevent there being a good deal for her to bother about.

CHAPTER XII

ALMA IN A SCRAPE

It was the custom of Miss Leland's school to hold the mid-year examinations before the Christmas holidays, early in December, so that the teachers and the girls might enjoy their holidays without the shadow of that depressing necessity hanging over them, and so that they might apply themselves to the preparation for them while they were still in the habit of studying. Miss Leland held the opinion that after the gay indolence of the holiday season, and when the girls were still in the state of homesickness and lassitude following their return to school, they were much less interested in making good marks, and much less capable of applying themselves.

Thus, the first week of a snowy December found the entire school in that state of tension which seizes any body of young people when a hostile body of older people is bent upon finding out how much they know.

"History from nine to twelve to-morrow," groaned Charlotte. "I've reread the whole volume.

I've crammed dates until I don't know whether Columbus discovered America in 1492 or 1776. I've 'rastled' with Free Silver, and I haven't the faintest notion what the trouble was about. A long, long time ago I knew whether Maryland was a Charter colony or not, but now I never expect to know again. I could write everything I know about this great and glorious country in two minutes, and it would be quite wrong at that, and the thought that we are expected to know enough to require three solid hours for writing it out is driving me rapidly into a state of chronic melancholia."

"What happened in 1812, Charlotte?" demanded Nancy in a dazed voice. "Something happened then, but I don't know what."

"Why, that was the year that Washington said 'Beyond the Alps lies Italy.' Which was quite true. And even if he didn't say it then, it would have been true, so you can't go far wrong there," replied Charlotte. "Nancy, kindly fold up your book. I am going to flunk, and I won't have you pass. If you try to study any more I'm going to sing the Marseillaise at the top of my voice."

"I think I *will* stop. I really do know my history, but I'm forgetting it the more I try to study."

After dinner that night, the living-room was empty during the usual hour for recreation, nearly all the girls having gone to their room either to

study, or simply as a matter of form, since it was considered highly undiplomatic, to say the least, to appear as if you were so sure of the outcome of your examinations that you felt privileged to take life easily.

What they did, once they were in the privacy of their own rooms, was, of course, strictly their own business. Two or three, who believed that rest was essential, had solemnly gone to bed. A dozen or even more of the seriously inclined had hung "Busy" signs on the panel of their doors, through the transoms of which the greenish illumination of the students' lamps burning within told their own story. The others, philosophically believing that if they were going to pass they would, and if they were destined to flunk they would do so in spite of the best-intentioned efforts at study, were cheerfully whiling away the two hours of grace in subdued revelry.

Alma, who had every reason to doubt that she would shine in her examinations unless she made a superhuman effort at cramming, and who, at the same time, was unable to comfort herself with Mildred's philosophical indifference, was curled up on her bed, her fingers in her ears, struggling to make the lines she read convey some sense to her weary brain.

"I say, Milly, will you ask me some questions?"

she suggested at length, lifting a weary face from her book. "I don't know *what* I know."

"Oh, bother! Don't study any more. What does it matter even if you don't pass?" said Mildred. "For goodness' sake don't you turn into a grind like Nancy. One thing I refuse to do is to room with anyone who's studious."

"But I'll flunk, as sure as fate," objected Alma, "and—and I don't want to, Milly."

"You're a bit late finding that out. It's not going to do you a bit of good to stuff now."

"Don't your father and mother mind if you don't pass?"

"Oh, Mother doesn't care a bit. She is always worrying herself to death for fear I'm overstudying. Dad sometimes rows at me about my bad marks, but Mother always takes my part. Besides this is my last year of school, and what earthly good will Latin or Algebra do me when I come out?"

"I suppose they really aren't much use," agreed Alma, finding this a very comforting notion. "Of course, it's different with Nancy; she wants to go to college."

"Well, of course if one wants to be a school teacher," said Mildred with a very faint sneer. "But that's a ridiculous idea for anyone who's as pretty as you are."

Alma hesitated; she felt the slight cast on Nancy in Mildred's remark, but she was afraid to resent it, and told herself that she would not be justified in doing so. She was silent for a moment, wondering why she liked Mildred, when Mildred did not like Nancy. Perhaps,—she was unwilling to admit this supposition, but it formed itself hazily in her mind—perhaps she herself did not *really* like Mildred. Perhaps way down inside of her she shared her sister's distrust of the girl. But why didn't she admit it? Because she was flattered with being the chosen friend of the most important girl in the school? Because she had accepted favors from Mildred? She blushed involuntarily as these thoughts glided through her mind.

She did not want to quarrel with Mildred, even when she knew that she was right and her roommate in the wrong, because she hoped that Mildred would invite her to visit her, and that through Mildred she might have some good times. She wished that Mildred wouldn't make mean little remarks about Nancy, because she felt ashamed of herself for not openly resenting them.

At length, however, she threw aside her book, and lent her rapt attention to Mildred's chatter about the coming holidays. In a little while other girls joined them, and the next hour of gossip drove

away her uneasiness for the coming day, and her uncomfortable reflections.

The last examination which was in Latin ended on Friday at noon. On the Wednesday of the following week the reports had been posted on the bulletin-board, and at the eleven o'clock recess some twenty girls were clustered around them struggling to get near enough to read their marks. Those who were closest called out the percentages to the others who pelted them with agitated questions.

"You got seventy-six in French, Denise. Good enough. Good heavens, Nancy Prescott, you made *ninety-two* in history, and Charlotte Spencer *ninety-four*. Ye gods and little fishes, I passed my Algebra—sixty-eight! Catch me, somebody; I'm going to faint."

"Kay Leonard flunked everything but her French," whispered another. "Well, it won't disturb her at all. What did I make in Latin?"

"Eighty-eight. Good for you. Drinkwater doesn't make anyone a present of her marks. I just scraped through. I say, Alma! Alma Prescott, what happened to you on your Latin?"

"Why?" asked Alma, peering over Allison's shoulder, and turning a little pale. "Did—did I flunk very badly?"

"Why, it just says 'Cancelled' after your name. Didn't you take your exam?"

"Of course I took it!"

"Well, there—you can see for yourself. It just has 'Cancelled.'"

A queer silence fell upon the chattering group of girls and for several dreadful moments every eye was turned on Alma, who, white as a sheet, was staring blankly at the uncompromising word written after her name.

"I—I can't understand," she said presently, in a scared voice. "I *did* take the examination—and I thought I really got through. I can't understand. Why should it be cancelled?" She turned her big, frightened eyes to Nancy, who, as pale as she was, only stared back at her.

"Why should my examination be cancelled?" repeated Alma, dazedly. "Was anyone else's cancelled too?"

"No. One, two, six girls flunked—and—for goodness' *sake*—Mildred Lloyd made the highest mark. Ninety-three! Mildred Lloyd, come here, and get your medal! Congratulations!"

Mildred strolled up nonchalantly, glanced at the board and turned away; only Nancy followed her curiously with her eyes. Then she turned to Alma.

"Haven't you any idea why your examination was cancelled?" she asked, in an odd voice that sounded as if her throat was dry. Alma shook her head.

"It's very strange. Come and let's ask Miss Drinkwater. Maybe it's only that your paper was lost or something like that." She tried to sound comforting, but she had no faith in her suggestion. Just then, however, the bell rang, and the girls had to go to their desks. Miss Leland took her place at one end of the room and stood waiting for silence. Everyone felt that she was there to make some important announcement and her grave, cold expression led all of them to suspect that it was not an entirely pleasant one.

She waited a moment after the room was silent. Alma looked piteously at Nancy, with a glance that said, "She's going to say something about me." Nancy kept her eyes fixedly on Miss Leland. Her lips were pressed together tightly, and her hands had grown as cold and damp as though she had just taken them out of ice-water. Her heart was beating so heavily that the frill on her shirt-waist trembled.

Miss Leland took a step forward, straightened a book on the big desk, and then looked up.

"Girls, for the first time in the history of this school, I am compelled to make an announcement that is as great a humiliation to me as it must be to you," she said, in a quiet, even voice.

"Ever since this school was founded there has never until now been any occasion when I have been

forced to doubt the honor of one of my pupils." She made another pause, and in that silence an electric thrill seemed to pass through each one of the girls; some of them flushed scarlet and others went white, as though each one felt in a hazy way some share in the guilt of the unnamed culprit.

"For the first time in eighteen years one of my teachers has had to bring to my attention the fact that a pupil of this school attempted to *cheat* in an examination. That examination has, of course, been cancelled, so that that girl's attempt to win a high mark, *dishonestly,* availed her nothing.

"I do not need, I am sure, to incite in you feelings of disgust and shame for that girl's action. Your own sense of honor makes any warnings on my part superfluous and insulting to you.

"Fortunately, the imposition was discovered, because that girl most unwisely left the interlinear translation of Virgil's Æneid, which she had used to assist her in the examination, on her desk, where it was found, and brought to me.

"I do not choose to announce the name of that girl, much as she merits the public disgrace. I shall speak to her privately, and if she can offer, which is not likely, any defense of her action, I may soften her punishment. Otherwise, I have no choice left to me than to expel her from a school which she has disgraced. Now, you may go to your class-rooms."

The girls rose in silence, and hardly knowing what they were doing, began feverishly to collect their books and papers. But neither Alma nor Nancy moved. In a few moments the assembly hall was empty, save for the two sisters, neither of whom seemed to have been conscious of the curious glances cast at them by the other girls as they went out.

When they were alone, Nancy got up and went over to Alma, who sat as if she had been turned to stone, with a face as white as chalk.

"Alma, of course I know you didn't do it," said Nancy, laying her hand on her sister's, and speaking in a gentle, trembling voice.

"Oh, Nancy, it's so horrible—it's so horrible," moaned Alma. "I don't know how all this could have happened. What shall I do, Nancy? What in the world shall I do?"

"Come, dearest, let's go up-stairs," coaxed Nancy. "It'll come out all right. Come, dear."

"Of course, now everyone knows that Miss Leland meant me," said Alma, dully. "Am I going to be expelled, Nancy? I can't stand it—I won't stand it. Come on, Nancy, let's get our things and go home."

"Alma, darling, you *didn't* do it?" cried Nancy, the very shadow of such a doubt making her feel faint and ill. Alma lifted a wan face and smiled.

"I don't *know* that I didn't do it," she said, drearily. "If they found a trot on my desk—and it must have been my desk, because mine was the only examination that was cancelled—why, how can I prove that I wasn't using it?"

"But you don't even own such a thing! You wouldn't dream of having one. In some schools girls are allowed to use interlinear translations for their daily work, but it's not permitted here, and it wouldn't have entered your mind to get one. Come, we'll go to Miss Leland at once. She's alone in her office now."

Alma let herself be guided up to the principal's cosy little sanctum, where Miss Leland was seated at her desk writing. A wood-fire smoldered with friendly warmth on the brightly burnished and-irons, and a clear, wintry sunlight fell in through the curtained windows, where a perfect garden of indoor plants bloomed gaily. But all these pleasant, homelike things seemed to share the chill hostility of Miss Leland's level glance, as the two sisters stood looking at her timidly from the threshold of the open door.

"You may come in," she said, with a curt nod. "No doubt, Alma, you wish to offer some explanation. Be seated."

"My sister wanted to say that there was a mistake. The book you referred to was never in her

possession, and she did not use it at her examination," said Nancy, speaking rapidly, and almost harshly, in her endeavor to keep from breaking into a fit of hysterical tears. Alma was quite incapable of saying a word for herself.

"Then I am sorry that it happened to be found on her desk just after she had left the examination-room," replied Miss Leland dryly, her tone expressing her complete lack of belief in Nancy's words.

"Alma, did you have that book?" asked Nancy, turning sharply to her sister. Miss Leland opened a drawer of her writing-table and took out a small volume, bound in green cloth, which she handed over to Alma. Alma had already opened her lips to utter a frantic denial to Nancy's question, when her eyes fell upon the book. She shut her mouth with a sudden gasp, and without taking it, simply stared at the inoffensive little volume with a fixed, horrified gaze.

"Is *that* an interlinear?" she exclaimed breathlessly. "Is that the book that was found on *my* desk?"

"So you *have* seen it before," remarked Miss Leland. "Alma, this is a very serious matter. There can be no excuse for a girl's making use of any text-book whatever at an examination. A failure is to be deplored, but it is not a disgrace—

and it is to be very much regretted that you did not choose rather to run the risk of an honorable failure than to attempt to steal a good mark. I have no choice in the matter. I am very sorry that I had to speak of it before the school, but I had to make a public example of the girl who could stoop to such an act. You understand, of course, that it will be impossible for you to continue as a pupil in this school."

For some reason Alma had grown quite calm, and when Miss Leland had finished speaking, instead of appearing to be overcome by the grim meaning in the last words, she rose quietly.

"Of course, if you cannot take my word for it that I never looked inside that book or anything like it in my whole life, why there is no use in my saying anything more," she said, with the utmost self-possession. "I don't know how it came to be on my desk ——"

"Alma, I am anxious to believe a girl is innocent until she is proved guilty," said Miss Leland, impressed by Alma's coolness, "only—you *have* seen this volume before?" She looked at the girl with a still doubtful and puzzled expression.

Alma hesitated a moment before she admitted slowly:

"Yes, I have seen it, Miss Leland. But I never knew what it was."

"You have seen it in the possession of some girl in this school?"

"That I can't answer," replied Alma, with a firmness that Nancy had never seen in her before. "I—I don't think you have a right to ask me any more questions, Miss Leland. If—if you just let the whole business go, I'm perfectly willing to—to bear the blame. Please don't ask me any more questions. Let it be as it is. Just as long as Nancy is satisfied that I never did that hateful thing, why, I don't mind, you know."

The two sisters looked at each other happily, each of them sincerely indifferent as to whether anyone else in the school believed Alma innocent or guilty.

"Come on, Nancy," said Alma, almost gaily. They had started to leave the room, when Miss Leland called them back.

"I am very anxious to believe in you, Alma. If there has been a mistake, be assured that it will be set right. I will tell the other girls at luncheon that —well, I must see. I am in a difficult position. You may both go now. I would advise you to go directly to your classes."

Nancy was curiously absent-minded as they made their way down-stairs, hand in hand. Then all at once she drew in her breath sharply, catching her under lip between her teeth. On the bottom step

she stopped short and, putting her hands on Alma's shoulder, swung her about so that she could look into her eyes. Her own were very bright.

"What is it?" asked Alma; then, for some reason, she colored and turned her eyes away.

"I know now where I saw that book myself, Alma," said Nancy.

"Nancy!" Alma's blue eyes now suddenly filled with tears. "Oh, Nancy—you won't say anything. No, no, you didn't see it. Please don't believe that of her."

"Two Sundays ago when I was talking to you—I noticed it in the bookcase in your room. I kept reading the titles on the books when I—you know the way you do when you're worried. It stood between a copy of 'Bryce's Commonwealth' and a French grammar ——"

"Nancy, you mustn't say anything, do you hear?" insisted Alma, beseechingly.

"I won't say anything. But—but I'm going to —you go on to class. I tell you, I won't say anything. Oh, Alma, you darling! Go on to class, I say."

"Nancy, what are you going to do?" demanded Alma, as Nancy broke away from her and ran up the stairs again. "You aren't going to Miss Leland?"

"No, I'm not. There, isn't that the postman?

You might as well see if there's anything for us before you go to French."

Alma walked down the hall toward the front door, where the maid was taking the noon mail from the postman. Nancy stood waiting, half-way up the stairs, evidently lost in thoughts which were not very pleasant, for her brown eyes sparkled with suppressed indignation and contempt, and once or twice she pressed her lips together tightly, as she always did when she was trying to make herself look calmer than she felt.

"Here's a letter from Mother," said Alma, coming back with an envelope in her hand. "I can't read it now, so you take it and save it for me." Nancy leaned over and took it from her.

"I—I may not see you until to-night," she said, slipping the letter into the pocket of her skirt. "You know you can trust me to hold my tongue, well—quite as well as she can, and she holds hers very well indeed. Do you mind being stared at and whispered about?"

Alma only smiled, then, with a little toss of her head, made a right about face, marched off, chin up, to brave the battery of glancing eyes and whispering tongues alone.

CHAPTER XIII

NANCY HAS A GREAT ADVENTURE

THERE was no doubt whatever in Nancy's mind that it was Mildred who had cheated in the examination. But whether Mildred had deliberately left the book on Alma's desk, or whether she had simply forgotten it, she did not know. The fact remained, however, that so far Mildred had made no effort to clear Alma of the suspicion, and knowing Mildred's nature as she did, Nancy was not inclined to think that Mildred would ever do so of her own accord. Nancy was willing to give her the benefit of the doubt so far as believing that she had not intentionally thrown Alma into such a damaging position. In the first place, she had no motive for injuring Alma, and in the second place, she ran a very great risk of discovery herself. Leaving the whys and wherefores, Nancy regarded the simple fact; that having thus injured Alma, Mildred was not going to try to clear her, and pay the penalty herself. The thought that most wounded Nancy was that Alma was under obligations to the girl who had treated her so badly. The handsome fur neck-piece Mil-

dred had "lent" her, was not yet paid for, and Nancy shrank from the idea of her sister's owing money to her. She had, of course, not mentioned this to Alma, although it had been the first thought that sprang into her own head, when she first became certain that Mildred was the culprit. It would have troubled Alma, who was already troubled enough, and she could have done nothing about it.

"I've got to get that money somehow," Nancy said to herself grimly. "I can write to Mother for part of it—about half, perhaps, but the other half I've got to get myself." Naturally, her first idea was to pocket her pride, and to ask her Uncle Thomas for the money. Not even that would hurt her so much as the thought of owing it to Mildred; but then she dismissed this plan from her mind. It was impossible; it would be a breach of their terms of friendship, for one thing, and for another, she felt that to explain to him her reasons for wanting it would be unjust to Alma.

While she was turning one plan after another over in her mind, she absently took her mother's letter from her pocket, and slit the envelope open with a hairpin. She glanced almost carelessly at the lines, written in Mrs. Prescott's pointed, flourishing hand, then all at once the meaning of the first sentence fixed her wandering attention.

"My Darling, Darling Little Daughters:

"I can hardly bring myself to write this letter. You don't know how hard it is for me—but I deserve the pain and humiliation. I am a very foolish woman, but, oh, my dears, I have made my mistakes only in trying to help you both. And now, what *have* I done to you? There was no one to advise me, and I know nothing whatever about business, but it seemed so perfectly practical, so absolutely *sure*."

All this was perfect Greek to Nancy, and she saw that her poor mother had evidently written the letter in an almost desperate state of mind. After two pages of self-reproach, it was gradually made clear to Nancy that Mrs. Prescott had made an unfortunate investment of her little capital, though the extent of the loss Mrs. Prescott did not explain. In an effort to increase their meagre income, she had taken all her money, or part of it, and bought stock in some oil interest in Texas. A Western promoter had assured her that it was the opportunity of a lifetime, he himself being either an unconscionable fraud or a self-deceiving optimist. Nancy had not the remotest idea when her mother had made the investment, but evidently the news of its complete failure had just reached her, and it was equally evident that it had been a total loss.

Utter bewilderment confused Nancy's thoughts, so that at first she could hardly realize all that the

misfortune might mean; she felt no terror; only a wave of pity and tenderness for her mother, whose misery was so pitifully expressed in the letter. Then she thought of Alma. Misfortune of that kind would hit both of them harder than herself, because they had a greater need for luxury and pleasure than she. There was nothing terrible to her in the thought of work, and of difficulties to be overcome, because, in her quiet way, she had a great wealth of self-confidence, the ardent ambition of youth, and that zest for struggle which is characteristic of strong natures. Alma and her mother, on the other hand, saw nothing but the wretchedness of thwarted hopes in such an existence of poverty and work. They were created for ease and luxury, just as the hollyhock is made to bloom against the sunny garden wall. Poor Mrs. Prescott, who had dreamed such happy fairy tales for her daughters, and who, with her own hands, as it were, had so innocently destroyed the little they possessed; and Alma, so thirsty for pleasure and beauty,—it was only on their account that Nancy suffered. She understood that it would be impossible for herself and Alma to come back to school for the next term; but that would have been impossible anyway, Nancy thought, even with Alma cleared of the dreadful suspicion that rested on her; for Nancy's stiff pride could not brook the thought of living among people

who had doubted her sister, even though the circumstantial evidence against Alma had been very strong.

"However shall I get all the money to pay Alma's debt now?" she thought, dazedly. "I can't get even half of it from Mother, because she would certainly deny herself the very necessities of life to send it. I *cannot* ask Uncle Thomas for it." She knew that in all probability she could influence Mr. Prescott, through his increasing affection for her, to help her mother out of their present difficulty, but the thought of doing so was utterly repugnant to her, and, it seemed to her, intolerably humiliating both for Mrs. Prescott and Alma. She was afraid that Mrs. Prescott, learning that Uncle Thomas had shown a favoritism for her, might urge her to this course, and she could not decide whether she should swallow her pride for her mother's sake and for Alma's, or whether she should insist that they fight their way courageously out of the difficulty. So far as she herself was concerned, there would have been no question; there was nothing that she would not endure rather than ask her uncle for a cent.

Her hands were trembling as she folded the letter up, and put it in her bureau drawer under her handkerchief case.

"How am I going to tell Alma?" Well, she would break the news to-night. First of all, she

must solve the problem of the debt to Mildred. Only one course was possible. There was her father's ring, which she always kept, and which was her very dearest possession. It was of the heaviest gold, and set with a large seal stone of lapiz-lazuli. She might raise perhaps thirty-five or forty dollars on it—which left about seventy still to be found by hook or crook. Never had any sum appeared so gigantic to Nancy. She could see no other possible means of getting it than by borrowing it temporarily from Charlotte, and paying it back by one way or another during the holidays. She knew that Charlotte would be glad to lend it to her, but she shrank from the thought of putting their friendship to such a use. However, there was no help for it. In Alma's pocketbook she found enough money to pay her way into the city. Her mother would certainly be sending them a little more in a day or two for their return home. She took the money—two or three dollars, left from the ten which Alma had borrowed from her,—and began to change into her suit, thinking, meanwhile, with a smile of incredulity, of the imprudence of sending herself and Alma to one of the very schools where their poverty would be contrasted with the abundance of Mildred Lloyds and Katherine Leonards.

When she was ready for town, she went to Miss Leland's office, and told her simply that she had

just received a letter from her mother which made it necessary to go to the city without delay. Miss Leland gave the consent, which Nancy, in her excited state of mind, was ready to go with or without. She caught the next train to New York, and by one-thirty was in the Grand Central Station, wondering where on earth, now that she was there, she would be able to get the money on the ring. She had a vague idea that the only possible place would be some pawn-shop, and she had read in Nicholas Nickleby that one can tell a pawn-shop by three golden balls hanging in front of it, and also that one would be likely to find it only in a squalid section of the business district. The dealer would certainly be Jewish, and he would in all probability not give her a tenth of what the ring was worth. None of these thoughts were likely to raise her spirits at all, and, when at length she found herself outside a dirty little shop on lower Sixth Avenue, gazing in upon a window display of dusty violins and guitars, travelling bags and tawdry jewelry, while above her the traditional golden balls creaked in a sharp wind, her courage all but failed her. She was frankly terrified by the sordid strangeness of her environment, by the dirty, sodden loafers that shuffled past her, and by the thought of haggling for money over the counter of that dingy and even sinister-looking little shop. At length, however,

she plucked up courage and, with her heart in her throat, entered.

The front part of the shop was empty and very dark. At the back was a swinging door, leading into another room, from which issued the sound of voices of two men. The little bell over the front door had rung as Nancy entered, to apprise the shopkeeper of a customer, and under the swinging door she saw a pair of shuffling feet moving toward it. The shopkeeper emerged, followed by the other man, who was evidently a customer come to make a purchase of some antique piece; for the pawnbroker seemed to deal in old bric-à-brac and what not, besides his regular historic business of money-lending.

"I will gif you dat box for vun hundert dollars, —mit dat it iss a gift," the shopkeeper was saying doggedly, as he came toward Nancy, and the other man, following him, laughed.

"Well, you certainly give awfully expensive presents," he remarked. "A hundred dollars, you old rascal—no one on earth would give that for a little box."

"Vell, only try to duplicate it—you will not find such a handsome piece dis side de ocean," returned the shopkeeper with a shrug. "Vot can I do for you, young lady?"

But Nancy had temporarily lost all power of

speech. She was not sure, indeed, that she wasn't dreaming—it was all so utterly strange, and whimsical, and impossible, that surely it could be so only in a dream. For the young man who had followed the pawnbroker out of the inner room was George Arnold! She was standing with her back to the door, but the light that came through the dirty glass shone squarely on his face, so that if she had not already recognized his voice she would have recognized his features beyond the shadow of a doubt. Her first impulse was to turn and fly, or to conceal herself hastily in one of the odd little sentry boxes, which were evidently designed to preserve the incognito of the pawnbroker's indigent customers. But already Mr. Arnold had cast a second curious glance at the unusual sight of a well-dressed, well-bred young girl in such surroundings, and with that second glance he had recognized her. His mouth opened slightly in a repressed gasp of astonishment. Probably, with a moment's thought, he might have pretended that he had not recognized her, in order to spare her any embarrassment, but he had already exclaimed, involuntarily:

"Why, Miss Prescott!" and had taken a step toward her. Nancy turned scarlet, and could only gaze at him helplessly.

"How can I serve you, young lady?" repeated the shopkeeper. Nancy hesitated, in a perfect

agony of embarrassment, while Mr. Arnold continued to look at her, evidently very much at a loss.

On the one hand, he disliked to discomfit her by being present while she transacted her business with old Zeigler, the pawnbroker, and on the other, he was equally unwilling to leave her to be swindled, as she very probably would be. Furthermore, while he realized that he had no business to inquire into her affairs, and that, to say the least, it would be the height of bad taste to do so, nevertheless he felt that she was in some difficulty and needed advice. The squalid little shop was an odd place in which to find the niece of old Thomas Prescott; for it was not likely that she had come there as he had, to browse around in a dilettante search for curios.

Nancy read the question, "What are you here for?" in his face, and guessed his indecision. On her part she wished fervently that he would go, and was racking her brains for some excuse to leave the shop and to come back later. But her frantic efforts at evolving some plan of escape within the space of fifteen seconds were fruitless. Zeigler for the third time repeated his question to her with a touch of impatience. Then Mr. Arnold desperately took the bull by the horns, and with a touch of pretended gaiety asked with a laugh:

"Are you in search of adventure? You aren't running away from school, are you?"

"No—that is——" stammered Nancy; then, driven to take him into her confidence to some extent, and trying to put her situation in the light of a prank, she laughed mischievously, and added with an air of candor, "You've caught me."

"What are you up to, young lady? Selling the family plate?" inquired Mr. Arnold boldly, and speaking to her as if she were a mischievous youngster, though his eyes were grave and puzzled. Nancy put up her chin, as if she were being scolded, and answered with a touch of childish defiance:

"Don't tell on me."

"Well, I won't—though you deserve it, ma'am," replied Mr. Arnold. "I won't—on one condition,—that you come with me, and 'fess up to all your misdemeanors, and let me give you the sage advice of a hardened sinner before you do anything rash. I realize that I'm taking a liberty, Miss Prescott, in concerning myself in what is strictly your own affair," he added seriously, "but isn't our friendship firmly enough established to allow me that privilege? What time is it?" He glanced at his watch. "Ten minutes past two, and I've had no luncheon. Have you?" Nancy admitted that she hadn't.

"Good. I can't begin to tell you how awfully lucky I consider myself in having met you, Miss Prescott. I wish you would come with me to some

nice little restaurant where we can decide the affairs of the nations. Are you in a great hurry?"

Nancy said that she wasn't. To tell the truth she was very glad that Mr. Arnold *had* concerned himself in her affairs, which she had begun to believe she was not managing any too well. They had talked in low voices so that the shopkeeper could only have heard fragments of their conversation, and then left the shop, without even a word of explanation to the irritated old money-lender.

Mr. Arnold hailed a taxi-cab, and they rolled off in state. Mr. Arnold had given the driver the address of a little French restaurant on West Forty-fifth Street.

"It'll be fairly empty now, and we can find just the table we want. *I* shall order your luncheon for you, because I know just exactly what things are peculiar to this place—their special tid-bits, and I feel like ordering a regular knock-out of a feast as a sort of celebration. Really, you've no idea how delighted I am to have discovered you." His frank, boyish pleasure in this freak of chance was so plainly written on his beaming face, that Nancy colored with a schoolgirl's naïve delight in such sincere flattery. The dreaded undertaking of her trip to the city was turning into a very charming little surprise party. In some way, she felt that she had known Mr. Arnold for a very long time,

and that really there was not the slightest need for concealing anything from him. His odd, attractive face was so friendly, his bright brown eyes so full of eager sympathetic interest, that almost before she had given a second thought as to whether she should or she shouldn't, she had begun to tell him the reason for her appearance at the pawnbroker's.

They had found a little table in a corner of the restaurant, and Mr. Arnold had insisted upon ordering almost everything on the menu that attracted his fancy.

"And above all things, you must try the hot chocolate, Miss Prescott. I suppose it's not manly, but I have the most juvenile fondness for hot chocolate, with great big blobs of whipped cream."

So hot chocolate they had, and innumerable rolls, hot and fresh from the oven, and various and sundry other delicacies, calculated to cripple a weak digestion for a month at the very least.

Drawn out by her growing confidence in him, and by her craving to talk out her troubles to some one whose advice would be sound and based on genuine sympathy, Nancy told him about her necessity for getting some money. The explanation involved a good many complications, and Nancy was as a rule unusually reserved. But Mr. Arnold was one of those rather rare people who can understand a great deal more than is said in just so many

words, and she did not have to go into details as to why, for example, she hesitated to ask her uncle for the money, or why it was impossible to write to her mother for it. She told him simply that there was a girl at school to whom her sister was indebted, and who had played Alma a very shabby trick; and that, therefore, she felt that it was absolutely imperative to clear Alma of the obligation to her. He listened attentively, interposing occasionally in the friendly tone such as an older man might use to a young one, so that she felt no embarrassment in making the whole affair clear to him. Nor did he seem to think that there was anything very awful in her trying to raise the money for herself with the ring as a security.

"Only you should have gotten someone's advice, Miss Prescott. A man like Zeigler would swindle you outrageously, and there are plenty of reputable places which make loans on jewelry as a security. How large is the debt?" Nancy told him.

"A hundred and ten dollars? You are unwilling to ask your uncle?" Then seeing a look of distress in her face, he went on hastily: "Well, I think I can understand. I admire your independence, Miss Prescott. I say," he asked suddenly, with a touch of shyness, "would you mind if I should call you Nancy? It sounds so much more friendly."

"I—I'd like you to," replied Nancy, simply. "It makes me feel sort of old to be called Miss Prescott."

"Very well, and it makes me feel quite antique to be called Mr. Arnold. I wish you'd flatter me into believing myself young once more by calling me George."

"Oh, goodness, I don't believe I could! I—I mean that sounds so dreadfully cheeky!" exclaimed Nancy.

"I suppose I must seem actually prehistoric to you," he said with a laugh that sounded just a little bit forced. "But if you practised a bit, you'd probably find that it would get easier for you, and it would please me very much. To return to business —I think that if you will let me have the ring, I can get the money on it for you this afternoon. I know the best place to go, where you will get something really proportionate to its value, and on the best terms."

Nancy could have hugged him in her relief and gratitude. She protested a little feebly against his putting himself to any trouble, but he waved her words aside, and she took the ring from her bag, and gave it to him. He looked at it curiously; inside the broad finger band was inscribed in characters almost obliterated by wear, the words, "To George, on his 21st birthday, 1891."

"It was Father's. Uncle Thomas gave it to him," explained Nancy, simply, and at the same moment both of them were thinking of the eccentric old gentleman, whose gift to a beloved nephew was now being used to assist that nephew's daughter in a difficulty in which *his* help was denied her.

"Now, how would you like to spend your time for three-quarters of an hour or so?" asked Mr. Arnold, as they walked out of the restaurant. "I am going off with this ring and I'll be back with the money as soon as I possibly can. You pick some place for me to meet you."

Nancy glanced up and down the street, trying to find some spot where she could amuse herself.

"I think I'd like to look around some book-shop —is there one near here?"

"I'm an authority on the subject. I know every book-shop in New York, and if you'll follow me I'll show you my favorite haunt. Then I can be sure that you won't wander away—my only trouble will be in getting you out of the place, and if I were wise I wouldn't let you go there under any circumstances. But my generosity was always very much greater than my wisdom."

He conducted Nancy, accordingly, to this paradise, and rather lingeringly withdrew on his errand, leaving her in the quaint little shop, where perfect tidal waves of books rose on all sides of

her, distracting her with alluring, familiar titles, with the sight of hundreds upon hundreds of rare old volumes, and with that peculiar smell of leather and paper and ink and mustiness which is to the nostrils of the book-lover as the scent of earth and trees is to the wanderer.

On one of the shelves her eyes caught a glimpse of a name on the back of three or four delicately bound volumes, and she quickly took one of them down to inspect it, suddenly remembering her uncle's remark about that "author-person." The name on the back of the book was "George Arnold." It was a volume of stories, finely bound, and illustrated with pen drawings by a very famous artist and designer; and was prefaced by a foreword from the pen of one of the most celebrated of the present-day English critics.

Nancy promptly climbed up on a high stool that stood near the shelf, and with her heels hooked on the second rung and the book spread open on her lap began to read. She had time to glance only here and there; and it was with surprise and pleasure that she saw a sentence in the preface which spoke of the "writings of Mr. Arnold" as being "an example of the most delicate artistry. A talent so rare, so peculiarly sensitive, so rich in a wholly inimitable poetry, and waywardness of fancy, that one hardly hesitates to pronounce it

actual genius." And it was this "genius," this "prophet in his own country," who at the present moment was hurrying off in *her* service. Nancy felt a positive thrill of dismay, mingled with something else that was wholly pleasant and exciting. But how in the world could she ever call him "George." Imagine calling a famous writer by his first name—it seemed impertinent, to say the least.

To tell the truth, she spent a good deal more of her time thinking about this simple, friendly gentleman than in browsing over the book-shelves which, under ordinary circumstance, would have been so fascinating to her. Why was he so very nice to *her*—insignificant her? How could she possibly be interesting to a man who had probably been intimate with many of the most celebrated men and women of the day? But, of course, it was very likely that he wasn't particularly interested in her, and was only that he had a generous disposition. He was ever so much older than she was—thirty-four anyway—and probably he thought she was a nice child.

She was pondering thus, the book still open on her lap, and her back to the door, when he returned, flushed with satisfaction, and also with haste.

"I say, I've done a marvellous stroke of busi-

ness," he announced, as he came up behind her. "You seem to have found a very absorbing book, Nancy—aren't you at all interested in learning what my amazing talent for high finance has accomplished?"

"I can't tell you how good you have been to me," began Nancy, gratefully and shyly.

"I haven't been good to you a bit. It's you who have been good to *let* me help you," he said, smiling down into her eyes. "I take it as a very high compliment that you were frank enough with me to tell me how I could serve you; because there is nothing, you know, that I would rather do. That sounds rather flowery, doesn't it? But it's quite true. Now listen—I have brought you the sum of one hundred and fifty American dollars. That's more than you expected to get on the ring, isn't it?"

"A hundred and fifty!"

"Here it is, in beautiful clean notes. I'll explain it all to you presently. Did you find anything nice? What book have you got there?" He glanced at the volume she held, and seeing what it was, laughed, and took it away from her.

"How did you ever find *that?*" he asked, in a deprecating voice, though, at that, genuinely modest as he was, he was not ill-pleased. "I thought you would have found something better. I'm not

posing as the modest author, and all that sort of thing, but there are some wonderful books in here that you shouldn't have missed."

"I—I didn't know you were—I mean ——"

"You mean you didn't know that I was all that that critic chap says I am? Well, I'm not. He's just gotten into the amiable habit of saying kind things in his old age—so that he can get into Heaven when he dies, in spite of all the damage he did in his youth. Come along—unless you want to look about you some more."

"I'll be ready in a moment," said Nancy, slipping off the stool. "I—there's something being wrapped for me that I want to get." With that she went off to the back of the store and had the little volume tied up, and paid for it with the last cent in her pocketbook. Then she returned.

"All right now? Here is your money." He took a fat envelope out of his pocket and gave it to her, and they left the shop.

As they walked across to Fifth Avenue, he explained to her rather vaguely the proceeding by which he had raised the money for her; but while she quite failed to understand it all she rested upon her faith in his superior intelligence in business matters.

"When I want to get the ring back again, what do I do? and don't I have to pay interest?"

"Oh, no, you don't have to pay interest, that's the wonderful part of it. And when you want it back, you just tell me. I'll have to get it for you, but you won't mind that, will you?"

"Oh, no—oh, you *have* been so kind, Mr. Arnold, I mean, G-George. Only you won't say anything to Uncle Thomas—of course you *won't*, but I'm just mentioning that."

"I won't breathe a word to any living thing on land or sea. This is our own private conspiracy, and no one shall have any part in it," he assured her, gaily. "Only please promise me that, if you should need any help again, you'll ask me. I—it disturbed me very much to find you at old Zeigler's, though of course it was my good fortune."

There was an abundance of time before Nancy's train left, so they strolled at an easy pace down Fifth Avenue, stopping to look in at the shop windows whenever they saw anything that caught their fancy, and chatting together as if they had known each other all their lives. At the corner of Forty-fourth Street, Mr. Arnold suddenly dove into a huge florist's shop on the corner, and in a moment returned bearing a bunch of Parma violets, tied with a silken cord and tassel.

"I say, will you wear these?" he asked, bluntly. "You know, I always wanted to give a bouquet to a young lady, but I never could find the young lady

to whom I wanted to give them. The flowers were plentiful, but I began to think that the lady didn't exist." Nancy colored at the compliment with which he proffered her the flowers, and dimpled as only a rosy girl can dimple. His attentions were very flattering, and his half-shy, boyish manner made them doubly so.

"Now do tell me what book you have there?" he asked, as they turned east on Forty-second Street. "Is it something very learned or very frivolous?"

With a little laugh, Nancy handed him the package.

"You can open it, if you promise to tie it up again," she said, watching his face out of the corners of her eyes, as he untied the string. He glanced from the book to her face, trying to look disapproving, though he could not quite conceal his look of naïve pleasure.

"*Very* frivolous. I see that I shall have to direct your book-buying as well as your business. Why didn't you let me get it for you if you wanted it?"

"Because I wanted to get it for myself—you probably wouldn't have let me get it."

"Well, if I had given it to you, I could have written something in it, and that's something I always wanted to do, you know, something about

'the compliments of the author' in a flowing script."

"Well, why don't you write something in it anyway?"

"May I?"

"Only not 'the compliments of the author.'"

He took her to the train, and then standing beside her seat, took out his fountain pen, and scribbled on the fly-leaf of the little volume.

"There," he said, handing it back to her. "Now, good-bye. I am going to see you again in the holidays, am I not? I have enjoyed two or three hours to-day more than I have enjoyed anything in years." He took her hand and shook it warmly, and then as the train gave a warning jerk, he hurried off.

With the great fragrant bunch of violets at her waist, with money in her pocket to set her mind at rest, and with the memory of a singularly pleasant episode, Nancy saw the wintry landscape, over which a fresh snow was beginning to fall, through rosy spectacles. Somehow, not even the thought of the latest and greatest trouble loomed so very black and terrifying in her mind. She glanced down at the little book in her lap, and then opened it at the fly-leaf. He had written, "To commemorate To-day," and had signed it simply, "George." It had been a day of unusual unhappiness and unusual pleasure—not even he had understood what the

mingling had been for Nancy, but the memory of the pleasure outweighed the memory of trouble; as if ashamed of herself she tried to fix her thoughts on plans for helping and advising her mother and Alma; but at length she gave it up, to review the little, delightful trivial memories of "To-day," putting off the recollection of trouble until To-morrow.

CHAPTER XIV

PARADISE COTTAGE

THE twenty-second of December, a red letter date, indeed, for some fifty excited, bustling girls, dawned without bringing much of a thrill to the two Prescotts. Neither of them could enter with genuine enthusiasm into the gay holiday anticipations of the others, finding in them too depressing a contrast to their own expectations of a not very happy Christmas tide.

Nancy had shown Alma their mother's letter, and had had several long and serious talks with the poor child, who had been almost overcome with despair. Neither of them even thought of the matter of the examination, that trouble having been completely wiped out by the newer and heavier one, nor did they draw any particular satisfaction from the fact that Alma's Latin examination had been credited, and her name cleared of suspicion, while the identity of the actual culprit remained their own secret. The debt to Mildred had been paid, Alma evidently believing that the money had been sent by Providence, and asking Nancy no questions.

So far as the matter of the examination was concerned, Miss Leland had allowed the subject to drop, simply announcing her gratification at the fact that there had unquestionably been a mistake, and that Miss Drinkwater was satisfied on this point. A coldness that reached the condition of an almost habitual silence sprang up between Alma and Mildred, and the fact that Mildred asked for no explanations gave further circumstantial proof of her own guilt. She knew that both Nancy and Alma knew what she had done, and this changed her former apparent fondness to Alma into a very sincere hatred, which was all the more bitter in that she was afraid to show it; while her always patent dislike of Nancy increased a hundredfold, though she now tried to conceal it.

The two sisters had not the remotest intention of betraying her; neither of them was small enough to have taken any pleasure in doing so, and furthermore they were too much concerned with the problem that now lay before them, to bother their heads about her one way or the other.

Charlotte was the only girl in the school whom the Prescotts had taken into their confidence about their misfortune; but even with her Nancy had been very reserved, for she hated to be pitied even by a close friend.

The incident of her trip to New York with the

ring and her meeting with Mr. Arnold Nancy did not mention; feeling a peculiar shyness about it, and a wholesome dread of being teased. Her violets had been smuggled up to her room so that they would not lead to questions and jokes, and had faded away slowly in an inconspicuous corner, diffusing their fragrance extravagantly as they drooped and wilted over the edges of a tooth-brush mug. But two of them had been chosen to immortalize their memory, and had been carefully pressed between the pages of the little volume of stories.

After a first outburst of despair and tears, Alma had taken the bad news from home with a quiet pluck that surprised and touched Nancy. In that one paroxysm of hopelessness, she had frantically avowed her intention of marrying Frank Barrows at once. It seemed that a callow and youthful affair of the heart had been brewing between them, nourished by numerous ardent and incoherent letters from the youth who, in the dignity of his Junior Year at Harvard, felt himself ready to assume the responsibilities of matrimony. But with admirable tact and firmness, Nancy had succeeded in detaching this idea from Alma's mind.

"You're much too young to think of anything like that yet; it would be worse than silly; and you wouldn't be doing it because you loved him, but

because you lacked the pluck to walk in a rough place for a little while," she had said quietly. "We can't think of ourselves, Alma. We have got to help Mother, and it would be no help to her if one of us should take a step that might lead to endless unhappiness."

"But what can we do, Nancy? Neither of us knows how to make a cent of money," argued Alma desperately.

"How can you be sure of that? We've never tried," was Nancy's serene answer. "Listen, Alma, I don't know how things stand with us yet. They may not be so bad as we imagine, or they may be worse. And if you want to know how it all seems to me, I'll tell you that I'm glad, yes, I'm almost glad that it has happened, except, of course, that it makes you and Mother unhappy."

"Glad!"

"Yes. I'm glad that we *can't* come back to this school. We've gotten nothing here. You know yourself how it has affected you being among these girls who have more than we can ever have probably in our whole life. It has made you long for things that I hope we'll never need. We're here under false pretenses, in a way. Here we are always feeling the contrast between our poverty and their wealth. You hear them planning good times, their trips, and their parties and their clothes, and

it makes you wretched, because you know that we can't have those things. Wouldn't we both be much happier if we were back at home again, making our own plans, enjoying our own good times—and, after all, don't you and I have better fun together, baking a cake, or chatting with Mother by the bedroom fire, than these girls have—it's certainly just as good fun, anyway. And isn't it better to think of doing something fine and useful, something that may make you independent, and even famous, perhaps, than to be thinking just of the parties you are going to give, and whether or not you are going to be popular, and so on?"

"I—I'm not like you, Nancy," Alma said in a low voice. "I—I guess I'll always be wanting all those silly frivolous things that I can't have. I love them. I love pretty clothes and luxury—I can't bear the thought of being poor. I just can't *bear* it. I would simply die, if I thought I should have to work for my living all my life. I wouldn't want to live at all." She made this confession very humbly and honestly, and Nancy felt a wave of pity for her, and almost a touch of shame, because she herself could look forward so optimistically to a future that would weigh so cruelly on the poor little butterfly.

"You know, Alma, that nothing is ever so bad as one thinks it's going to be. Just as soon as we

resign ourselves to being miserable, something nice happens. I've often noticed that. Do you remember hearing about those balls of yarn that some German mothers give their little girls when they are teaching them how to knit? Wrapped up inside the ball are all sorts of funny little surprise presents, and as you go on knitting they fall out, here and there, when you aren't expecting it. Only you've got to keep on knitting. Well, I think that life is sort of like that—you go on steadily doing all sorts of commonplace, dull things day in and day out, and then all of a sudden, every now and again, something lovely and unexpected happens, just as the surprise falls out of the knitting-ball."

This idea cheered Alma up tremendously, and even made her dimple like a child who has been coaxed out of a fit of tears by a quaint little story. Her old-time unquestioning faith in Nancy was revived again, and she felt that if Nancy could take a fairly cheerful view of a very dark outlook, why, it could not be so very bad, after all.

They left for home again, on the early afternoon train, with ten or fifteen of the other girls, all of whom were, of course, in the highest spirits. Only Charlotte knew that they would not return to Miss Leland's after the holidays, and her sorrow at parting with Nancy was touchingly apparent in her effort to seem cheerful.

"We'll see each other soon, old dear," she had said, trying to sound gay, and then suddenly she kissed them both, adding to Nancy, "You know I've never liked any girl as much as I like you, Nance."

"Will you come and spend Saturday night and Sunday with us, often, after the holidays?" asked Nancy. "We won't be able to do much, but we can have a good time, just being together."

"Oh, can I? I'd rather do that than go to the best party in the world!" cried Charlotte, eagerly. "Good-bye, you dears—and—and you know, Nancy, if—if I can ever help you—oh, you don't know how happy I'd be if you'd let me!"

She came with them to the station, for her own train to Denver did not leave before night, and it was her lean, boyish figure, standing on the station platform, hands in the pockets of the familiar red sweater, which was the last memory the Prescotts carried away with them of Miss Leland's school.

It was after four o'clock when the two girls, trudging up from the Melbrook station, through the snow, at length came in sight of the little brown house. The long red rays of the sinking sun threw the shadows of the bare trees across the unbroken white surface of the lawn; and the cottage, with its gabled roof, was silhouetted against the ruddy, west-

ern sky, so that it looked as if the light were radiating from it. The snow on the path up to the porch was broken only by the footmarks of old Hannah's roomy arctics, and the little star-shaped prints of a dog's paws, which meandered across the lawn, and then back to the fence.

"Oh, Nancy!" Alma turned a shining face to her sister. "I don't much care what happens—it's home, and nothing can change that! Mother and Hannah's inside, and there's a fire, and it's all so snug, and safe, and *loving!*"

Nancy, who was gazing at the beloved little place with bright, dreamy eyes, and that tender smile on her mouth that always gave her face a singularly winning sweetness, answered:

"It makes me think of a picture I saw once—it was called the 'House at Paradise'—I don't know why. It was just the picture of a quaint little house, that seemed to be glowing from something inside of it—most likely it didn't mean anything at all, but something that the painter felt when he saw the house—it was like a poem or a little song, except that the artist had expressed what he felt in shapes and colors instead of words or music—and it gave you a feeling of rest and contentment. And perhaps because the house in the picture made me think of our home, I've always thought of this as 'Paradise Cottage.' Oh, my dear, let's *run!*"

And with that, away they scampered, clutching their bags, and kicking up the snow as they ran.

Mrs. Prescott had seen them from the sitting-room window, and almost before they had gained the porch, breathless and laughing and rosy, had flown to meet them.

"Hurray! We're home! Oh, Mother, you darling, angel-lamb!"

What need was there to remember in that delightful moment that there were things to worry about, for, as Alma had said, "after all it's home, and nothing can change *that!*"

It was not until after supper, when they had gathered around the fireside just as they used to, in dressing-gowns and slippers, that they opened the council of war.

As matters stood, their little income had been reduced by Mrs. Prescott's unfortunate speculation to something under a thousand dollars a year, "hardly enough to cut any capers on," Nancy observed tranquilly. "One term at Miss Leland's would swallow up our year's income at a single gulp. But, at any rate, we can skid along on one wheel until Alma and I get things started."

"Oh, my dears, what can you do?" sighed Mrs. Prescott. "I had hoped for so much. It will kill me to feel that my daughters are forced to work for their living by my fault. I thought that if only

we had a little more money, I could afford to give you pretty clothes, and to let you visit the friends you would be making at Miss Leland's. I—I built castles like a child, I suppose, and it kept me happy, while you were away. We had such nice times talking, Hannah and I, about all the lovely things that were in store for you. You were to have what I always longed for, pretty things, and good times, and admiration, and never a care, and it all seemed so certain, too."

"Darling," Nancy rubbed her cheek tenderly against her mother's little, helpless white hand, "no one ought to expect all that from life; and all the people who have those things have probably paid some price for them that the world knows nothing about. I wouldn't enjoy anything that I hadn't earned. I guess we weren't made to be 'little sisters of the rich,' Alma and I. The girls that count on their friends to give them the things that they can't get for themselves, have to pay for them in a way that I'm not willing to pay."

"Perhaps—who knows," began Mrs. Prescott, a little timidly, as she reiterated her favorite hope, "perhaps, after all, Uncle Thomas *may* ——"

"Don't, dearest," pleaded Nancy. "Perhaps he may, but we *can't* count on that. No," she went on briskly, "Alma and I aren't going to lose any time. We are going to find out right away what we can

do, and proceed to do it. Personally, I think that we are a highly valuable pair, and if only other people can be made to think so, too, why, we'll be having new-milled gold brought around to the front door in coal-wagons!"

"I really do think that I'd sort of like to make some money," added Alma. "Of course I'm not fitted for anything in particular, but, do you know, I was just wondering why I couldn't get some position like that girl in Mr. Dixon's office. I was talking to her one day when Nancy and I went up to see him about something or other, and she said that all she had to do was to take 'phone messages, and answer some of his letters for him—it was a sort of secretarial job, not expert of course, because he's just starting out, and he can't afford an expensive secretary. But I think she made fifteen dollars a week, and she said she paid for all her clothes, and part of her board. Do you know what, she said that after the first of the year she expected to get a position in New York, and I'll bet my hat that I could get that very place!"

Inspired by this sudden idea, Alma sat bolt upright on the shabby sofa, and pursing up her lips, with self-satisfaction looked from her mother to Nancy, who promptly applauded.

"Brilliant! I remember her saying that, too. Let's go over and see Mr. Dixon to-morrow," said

Nancy. "I don't see why *I* couldn't give lessons, you know, tutor children—like the two little Porterbridge girls, for example. Margaret doesn't go to school because she's so delicate, and I know that last winter Mrs. Porterbridge kept Dorothy at home with her. I might even be able to get up a little class. I don't look so awfully young, and lots of girls my age have done it. Miss Drinkwater at school told me that she had begun to help her father with his pupils when she was less than seventeen, and I'll be eighteen in March. I'd love it, too."

"It is so humiliating to me to think of you earning money from people like the Porterbridges," said Mrs. Prescott in a low voice; yet she knew that she could not try to dissuade Nancy. She knew that the two girls were about to follow the only possible course, and she bravely tried to smother the sorrow of her ruined dreams for them. One thought only still lingered in her mind, from which she drew a ray of childish comfort, namely, that after all, Mr. Prescott would relent. But she said nothing about this any more.

"I don't think it's humiliating, dearest, and you mustn't feel that," urged Nancy. "And we are going to have good times. Oh, don't feel that you are at fault, Mother—don't blame yourself."

The tears that had been gathering in Mrs. Pres-

cott's eyes spilled over and began to roll slowly down her cheeks.

"Oh, but I do, I do," she whispered, trying to keep her lips from shaking. "I'm turning into a pessimist—perhaps it's best. I—oh, you and Alma! I'm so jealous of other mothers who can give their daughters so much!" and here she began to cry gently. The two girls sat looking into the fire, feeling somehow that tears would comfort her better than anything they could say just then; and indeed in a little while, she dried off her cheeks and began to smile again; Mrs. Prescott could not be a pessimist; and her cheerful, rather unreasoning optimism, if sometimes it had proven dangerous, was now a source of strength and good spirits to them all.

Soon they were all chatting and laughing like schoolgirls, the three of them. The fire sputtered softly, its dropping embers glowing and paling, its warm light casting a sort of charm over the familiar shabby little room.

Alma had snuggled closer to her mother's knee, like a child, and Mrs. Prescott, as she talked, was absently winding the yellow curls around her finger. Nancy was sitting on the hearth-rug, hugging her knees. She was evidently enjoying thoughts of her own, because she was smiling into the fire.

"I used to think I wanted ever so many things," observed Alma, with a pretty little air of earnest thoughtfulness. "But do you know what, I've discovered that I never really wanted anything more than what I've already got—you and Nancy, Mother."

CHAPTER XV

THE INCOMPREHENSIBLE MR. PRESCOTT

A LITTLE after five o'clock on a dull January afternoon the two sisters met on the road that ran from Melbrook to the cottage. It had been just a week since they had actually started in "working." Alma had just spoken in time to get the position that had been opened in the young village lawyer's office, guided by that kindly Providence which often, if not always, shows a disposition to help those who are sincerely eager to help themselves; and she showed a conscientious zeal for getting off to her work promptly in the morning, as well as for giving her family accounts of every day down to the last detail at night. Mr. Dixon was a very solemn, important young man, who entertained the belief that a great future lay ahead of him, and who treated every case as if it involved millions. He was at the court-house in Melbrook most of the day, so that Alma had a good deal of time to herself, during which she had begun to find the greatest entertainment in watching all that was going

on in the street. A thoroughly sociable little person, she had become very friendly with the fat, jolly old wife of the grocer, over whose shop Mr. Dixon had his modest office, and with various others of the village people who, while they may have wondered at the fact that old Mr. Prescott's niece, "and him a multi-millionaire"—working among them, enjoyed, no doubt, the piquancy of the situation, and had begun to think simply that the young ladies must be eccentric like their uncle.

"I was telling Mrs. Haggerty to-day," remarked Alma, as she caught up with Nancy, and immediately opened up on her budget of news which, like the purse of Fortunato, was never empty. "I was just telling her that I thought every girl ought to know how to make her own living. It makes 'em independent, and all that. I was telling her, you see, how I expected to make enough money very soon to go to Europe. 'Now,' I said, 'if I was depending on a husband or a father, I'd probably never go. Or else I'd have to beg and beg, which is very humiliating.' She agreed with me absolutely. She said that some men are 'terrible close'—I've no doubt she meant Mr. Haggerty, you know—we had a splendid talk. You'd never think that Mrs. Haggerty was such an intelligent person."

Nancy bit her under lip, to keep from laughing;

the idea of Alma expounding the gospel of "the new woman" to fat, cumbersome Mrs. Haggerty, was quite exquisite; but there was something, too, that was touching in Alma's enthusiasms. It was all a game to Alma, and she hoped that Alma would always find it so; consequently she never laughed at her sister's earnest extravagances, which were usually as fleeting as they were ardent.

"I stopped off and got some cakes for tea," she said, hitching the warm, spicy-smelling bundle which she was carrying. "It's Saturday, and I got my first week's pay, so I thought we'd have a treat. They are those scrumptious little raisin bars, you know."

"I don't see how you are clever enough to teach, Nancy," said Alma, looking at her sister's rather tired face with admiration. "I'd be throwing books and things inside of five minutes. But isn't it wonderful to think that we are really and truly making money? Did you ever believe that we could do it? I just hope that Uncle Thomas hears what we are doing—that'll just show him that we don't want anything from *him*. I wonder what Mildred would say to us—wouldn't she be shocked, though?"

"Well, thank goodness, we've got to the point where we don't have to bother about what Mildred or anyone else thinks of us," replied Nancy.

"Charlotte wouldn't think anything of it if we were both charwomen, and people like Miss Bancroft wouldn't either."

"Miss Bancroft? Do you mean that fat old lady that we met at the Porterbridges'? Why do you speak of her? You don't know her very well, do you?" asked Alma in surprise. Nancy flushed a little. She had said nothing either to her mother or Alma about her visit to Mr. Prescott, simply because she did not wish them to build any false hopes; and now she was rather at a loss.

"I just knew what she was like the minute I saw her, and besides she was at the Porterbridges' today. She came into the schoolroom. when I was teaching Dorothy and Margaret. Of course she was awfully surprised to see me, because she thought we were both at school, and I suppose she wondered why I was there. Anyway, she was perfectly darling to me; she asked about you and Mother, and then she said she wanted us to come to tea next Wednesday, all of us. She said she'd write Mother a note. You see, lovely things are beginning to happen already."

"Wasn't that awfully nice man, who was always dancing with you that night, her nephew? Somebody said that he was a very well-known writer, or something, so of course that made me dreadfully afraid of him," remarked Alma casually, perfectly

unconscious of the commotion that her careless words were rousing in Nancy's thoughts.

"Yes—yes. He's Miss Bancroft's nephew. He was staying with her last summer," she stammered, trying to sound just as she should if she were speaking of any perfectly unimportant but agreeable young man.

"I think he must have liked you ever so much," continued Alma, in a judicial, and utterly impersonal tone of voice. "I was just thinking, that probably he fell in love with you, and is just waiting until you are older to ask you to marry him."

"Alma! How can you say anything so ridiculous?" cried Nancy, turning a bright red, and looking positively angry. Alma stared at her round-eyed.

"Why, what did I say? There's nothing so ridiculous in that. You aren't angry, are you?"

"No, but you mustn't be silly," replied Nancy, who was a little ashamed of her outburst, and who secretly was not ill-pleased at Alma's romantic suspicions. "Come on, let's hurry. These cakes are still hot."

Inside the little house, Alma banged the door behind her, while Nancy shouted gaily to her mother up-stairs.

"Well, well, well, what is all this noise for?" inquired a calm, masculine voice from the sitting-

room. The two girls stopped still, thunderstruck; for the voice, unfamiliar in its genial accents, was nevertheless unmistakably the voice of Mr. Prescott! Alma stared at Nancy, Nancy stared back at Alma, neither of them knowing whether to stay where they were or to go forward.

"I shan't bite," remarked Mr. Prescott, mildly. Nancy boldly advanced, being on more familiar terms with the "Ogre" than the frankly terrified Alma, and to Alma's amazement he proceeded to kiss them both, and then, as if embarrassed, cleared his throat, and said "How-do-you-do" in a dry, formal tone.

"So you young ladies aren't at school any more?" Nancy suspected that he knew why they had come home, and what they were doing, indeed that he had made this visit to satisfy himself on this point, but that he felt awkward about asking them.

In a few moments Mrs. Prescott came downstairs. She looked older and sadder than she had the last time he had seen her, and, because she had denied herself any new clothes since she had lost the money, she now wore an old gown which she had had for years. It was not a pose with her, for she no longer pitied herself, or bemoaned her limited means, but rather a sincere half-childlike desire to punish herself for having, as she believed,

deprived her daughters of what she considered the best things in life. Nevertheless, her natural instinct for daintiness had asserted itself in the little touches of lace at the neck and wrists—no dress was ever unbecoming to her—and she looked pretty and dignified as she greeted Mr. Prescott.

It was not long before the first feeling of constraint wore off. As Alma said afterwards, it was impossible to believe that they had been laughing and chatting with the "Ogre" "just as if he were a nice old man." But perhaps the warmth of the fire thawed him out, or perhaps he yielded to the softening influence of tea and freshly baked cakes, against which the heart of no man is proof. He called Mrs. Prescott "Lallie," and paid her two compliments. He gave them a very long discourse on the value of a scientific education for everybody, and from that veered off into a heated tirade against the uselessness of modern education, anyway.

"Drop a boy in the water, and he'll learn how to swim. Nobody learns anything until they discover a *need* for knowing it." This was one of his favorite texts, and no doubt it had been many a long day since he had known the pleasure of expounding it, unless he harangued his butler, or the morose old man who trimmed his lawns. It was Alma who was particularly inspired to conversation

with her uncle. She had completely lost her terror of him, and had decided that he was a "duck." With her mouth full of raisin cake, she told him everything that she had discussed with Mrs. Haggerty. With the most unpremeditated naïveté she quoted the sage remark of the grocer's wife to the effect that some men were "terrible close." Both Nancy and Mrs. Prescott stared at her, torn between dismay, amazement, and a desire to shriek with laughter. But her innocence of any design in making this extremely pointed observation was not to be doubted. Alma was incapable of saying anything with a concealed motive. She was simply full of her new ideas and enthusiasms on the subject of "being independent," and she felt that her Uncle Thomas would be interested in them.

"Am I to understand that you two young ladies are--earning money?" inquired Mr. Prescott. His face, illumined by the fire, was well worth studying; amusement, chagrin, curiosity, and admiration were mingled in his changing expressions.

"Indeed we are," replied Alma, quite beaming with self-satisfaction. "*Ever* so much. We never believed that we could do it, Nancy and I—but then we found out that we *could*. I am making fifteen dollars a week, and besides I'm getting an awful lot of experience—that, of course, is what counts

most, don't you think, Uncle Thomas? And if I'm making fifteen dollars now, there's no telling what I'll be making in a few years. I read the other day about a woman who is making a hundred thousand dollars a year in some business out west—so you see there's no limit to what I may be able to do. Of course, Nancy makes more than I do—Nance is much cleverer than I. But what I was saying to her last night is this, that probably I may succeed more financially, because I shall follow business lines, while Nancy's work is more the intellectual kind, you know, and that isn't as good for making money. Nancy will probably be famous, and I'll be rich."

"Bless my soul!" gasped the "Ogre," then suddenly he threw back his head, and laughed and laughed, nor could Nancy and Mrs. Prescott keep from joining in. The more Alma proclaimed her enthusiasm for business, the more patent her utterly delightful inaptitude for it became. A curly-haired baby of two solemnly discoursing on the nebular hypothesis could not have been more touchingly ludicrous than Alma, with her profound admiration for the "intelligent" Mrs. Haggerty.

"Look, Uncle Thomas, I just got paid to-day," she announced, and opening her shabby little purse, took out a small roll of very dirty bills, and waved them triumphantly before his eyes.

His face grew sober, and he leaned over, and took them gently from her hand. For a moment or two he looked at them, with an odd little smile on his lips.

"I know just how you feel, my dear," he said. "Now, I'm going to show you a sleight of hand trick that I—I used to play on your father. Shut your eyes—Nancy, you and Lallie must shut your eyes, too." Laughing, all three obeyed him. "Now, open them," he commanded, with a chuckle. "You see, ladies, that I have nothing up my sleeve? Very well; take these bills and count them." Alma carefully counted them and handed them back. "There are two fives and five ones," she told him, gravely. He rolled them up.

"Everyone is satisfied, then, that there are two fives and five ones? Fifteen dollars in all, being my niece's payment for services rendered for one week. Good. I now place them in my left waistcoat pocket. So. Now, I'll say a few magic words. *Abra-cadabra!* Good. I now place my fingers in my *right* waistcoat pocket." And he drew forth a single bill, crisp and new, which he handed to Alma with a bow.

"Fifty dollars!" shrieked Alma. "Uncle Thomas!"

"It's a simple trick of mine, which I call 'Compound interest,'" said the "Ogre" with a short,

pleased chuckle; then he grew grave, and turning to Mrs. Prescott said, in a gentle, friendly voice:

"Lallie, I wish you would tell me—everything that has happened. I would be very dull, indeed, if I could not guess that you and my nieces have had a new misfortune. I blame myself. I—I have made mistakes, and—well, life is very short."

Mrs. Prescott was silent for a moment, and sat up stiffly, as if uncertain whether she should listen to the dictates of her pride or of her hopes. Then presently, speaking in a quiet, monotonous voice, she told him about her bad investment, and why she had made it.

"I can understand that you think me a very foolish woman, Uncle Thomas," she said, with a sad little air of self-reproach and dignity. "I have made serious mistakes, and what has been most dreadful is the fact that not only I, but those I love, have had to pay for them. I have always loved very worldly things, but that is in my nature—some people are made that way. I never knew the 'value of money.' I always hated the very phrase. In my mind money stood only for the things it could buy, dainty clothes, pretty surroundings, ease, the opportunity to surround myself with friends. You looked upon money always as a sort of reserved power, never to be expended on trivial things.

"I dreaded the thought that my daughters

should have to be deprived by our poverty of all the things that seemed to make life pleasant and happy. I wanted them to have what the daughters of rich people have. I wanted them to be known and admired. I hoped that they might make good marriages, and always I was planning in my mind how I could give them opportunities. I'm being very honest with you, Uncle Thomas, and it's not easy, so don't be displeased with me." She turned her pretty eyes pleadingly to his face.

"I'm not displeased. I have never heard your views," he replied, quietly. "They are wrong—they have been nearly fatal, but I am glad to hear them, because your belief in them has been very sincere."

"Nancy did not take my point of view, and I confess that never until now did I understand hers," continued Mrs. Prescott. "I believed that I was doing right in sending them to a school where they would be thrown with girls who—who might help them. The expenditure was beyond my means, but I have always been too optimistic—I felt sure that the good that would come of my plan would justify what looked like a most foolish extravagance. Nancy's idea was to make her way by her own efforts. I was always taught to believe that a woman who worked for her living was—well, in a way, that she lost 'caste.' People would

be nice to her, but they would always consider that she belonged to a—well, was different. That is the old-fashioned idea, you know, and I cannot be wholly blamed for holding it. I could not see that any bright future lay ahead of a girl in such a position. Nancy, on the other hand, has always tried to tell me that nothing could be more humiliating than to try to 'get things out of other people,' as she expressed it.

"And—and then, I took one last foolish step." Mrs. Prescott lifted her head, and looked into the old man's grave face, with an expression of mingled humility and pride.

"You cannot blame me more than I blame myself," she said, quietly. "In my effort to increase our little income, so that I could put my daughters more on a footing with the friends they would be making, I made a very unwise investment; and I —lost.

"I feel that I can tell you this much, Uncle Thomas, too," she went on proudly. "I had always believed that in time you might lose your bitter feeling toward me, for the sake of my daughters. I persistently believed that after all you would help them, and on the very flimsy foundation of this hope, I made my plans. I felt that I had a right to give them advantages that were beyond my income, because you would alter your

own ideas. There, I've been very frank. I feel that I can be, because now my daughters have determined to make their own way, without anybody's help. And—and I want you to feel that I agree with my Nancy absolutely, and that we have no hidden motive of selfish interest in renewing a pleasant friendship with you."

When Mrs. Prescott had finished speaking, everyone was silent for a little while. Then Mr. Prescott said, abruptly:

"Thank you very much." He turned to Nancy with a smile. "So you're the Miss Independence around here? You won't take anyone's help eh?"

She smiled back, and answered simply, and with a sincerity that could not be doubted:

"I like to be independent, so that you won't think that our affection for you is based on any hateful, selfish reasons, Uncle Thomas."

"Capital," he returned, in his dry, non-committal way. "I believe you have the genuine article called pride. You have been only vain, Lallie," he added, bluntly but not unkindly, turning to Mrs. Prescott. "Very vain, very foolish. And now that we've talked business, I'm going to ask if I may stay to supper?"

Of course he stayed. Poor old Hannah, still cherishing hopes of softening the hard heart of this uncompromising old man, surpassed herself

with an offering of hot beaten biscuits, and the simple little meal was a decidedly gay one. And Hannah, as she saw the last of her delicacies vanishing silently down the "Ogre's" lean, old throat, indulged in a bright vision of his eventual surrender.

CHAPTER XVI

MEASLES—AND THE PECULIAR MR. ARNOLD

But, having stuck to his principles for thirteen years, Mr. Prescott was not a man to change them in a moment of impulse. After that evening at his niece's he made no further reference to their affairs, and seemed quite oblivious of their difficulties. Some very narrow straits lay ahead of the Prescotts, and they had to deny themselves things that once their little income had allowed them.

Winter wore away into spring, and the girls went on doggedly with their tasks. All three of them had their moments of depression, when it looked as if all the rest of their life must be spent so, pegging away day in and day out, unable to save enough to amount to anything, or to allow them to prepare themselves for other work. But they were careful never to impart these gloomy feelings to each other. Charlotte's long, gay letters to Nancy, filled as they were with accounts of her Easter holidays, and the various gossip of the

school, made them feel that they were definitely set on a path that would lead them far from the pleasures which she unconsciously made so very attractive. And poor Alma could hardly smother the disappointment of having to write back to Allison, refusing a tempting invitation to spend three weeks of the summer at her camp in the Adirondacks. But she did it bravely, and without even mentioning the invitation to either her mother or Nancy. It seemed as if all the world were having gay times, and that only they were buried away in Melbrook.

When the first warm days came in, it became more and more irksome to set off grimly to a day spent either in Mr. Dixon's little office, with its one window opening on a tempting world of green trees and blue skies, or in patiently listening to the stumbling recitations of two very indolent and capricious little girls.

"It's been just plain knitting for an awfully long time," said Alma wistfully, as they waved to their mother and set off one morning toward Melbrook. "Oh, I'd give anything if we could just chuck it all for to-day and go off to the woods. We'd take Mother, and Hannah, too, and we'd carry our luncheon with us—and we'd forget everything that was the least bit bothersome. We'd go in wading up there where the creek makes that lovely little

pool in the woods, just beyond the Whiterights' place, and Hannah could sit and sew, and Mother would read. Goodness, I'd like to."

But, unfortunately, the business of money making *was* a business, and not a game, so all that Nancy could do was to shrug her shoulders and smile, with a shadow of Alma's wistfulness in her eyes. It looked as if life would be very plain knitting indeed, for a while, and perhaps quite a long while. In the first place, Miss Bancroft had gone away for a month or so. They had been to see her several times during the winter, and she had dropped in to see Mrs. Prescott fairly often. There had been something very delightful in those few afternoons spent with her; for she was one of those charming old ladies who remain perennially girlish, and her interest and sympathy in their talk had won from them a very warm affection. Mr. Arnold had not appeared on the scenes during the entire winter and spring; having gone to England, Miss Bancroft had casually explained, for an indefinite stay. This intelligence had depressed Nancy unaccountably, but she explained her depression to herself on the grounds that she was worried about reclaiming the ring, which she valued so dearly. She had managed to save up only twenty-five dollars to pay on the borrowed one hundred and fifty, and in order to keep that amount

intact had had to forego the rather pressing necessity of a new dress, and some fresh curtains for the sitting-room windows. What worried her most was the fact that the Porterbridges would not be taking lessons from her after the first of June, and that she would have to find some way of making money during the summer months. It was already May, so that she had only a few weeks in which to get another position, and as yet, she had not been able to decide what she could do.

She was thinking about this problem as she parted from Alma at the crossroads about a mile beyond the cottage. What a morning it was! What a dazzling sky, what green, beckoning fields, and away from her, the white road winding off into alluring distances. A farmer, driving a wagon filled with fresh vegetables, was approaching, singing lustily, in a jolly, untuneful voice. Nancy looked back at him as he passed her, and for the first time felt a twinge of self-pity. With every ounce of her, she longed for untrammeled freedom on that glorious morning.

"But it's not nearly so hard for me as it is for Mother and Alma," she told herself. "Oh, if only they could go off together for just a few weeks, to some inexpensive little country place, or to the mountains, I wouldn't mind a bit staying here alone with Hannah. Poor little Alma, she never says a

word; but I know that it's terribly hard for her to look ahead probably to years of this same sort of thing. I can see how Mother was willing to do anything to spare her, and to give us good times."

The Porterbridges were kind-hearted people, and in spite of her young charge's appalling indifference to study, she did not have a disagreeable time at all during class-hours. She was free an hour after luncheon, and from there went to another house where she taught a little boy lessons in Greek mythology. Alma was usually free at about four o'clock, so that they could meet each other, and get home together at about five.

As the days grew longer, they had their tea out in the little garden, which Nancy zealously tended. And these pleasant evenings made the whole day seem quite cheerful—if it had not been for the incessant worry about the future.

One afternoon in the middle of the month, they were sitting out in the little arbor, where the vines, covered with a veil of delicate, sticky little leaves, already offered a light shade from the beams of the western sun. Nancy and her mother were considering the possibilities of having some fresh holland slip covers made for the living-room chairs, which were becoming indecently shabby.

"We can't possibly have the chairs done over,"

Mrs. Prescott was saying—she had become actually thrifty during the last few months—" and I really think that the most economical thing we could do would be to have pretty chintz or holland covers made. I hate to look so shabby, no matter how little money we have. What do you think, Nancy? "

" I think it's a good idea, if we can possibly afford it. Only, first I'd like to be sure of some work for this summer. Everyone is going away, and I don't know what I can do, exactly." A little frown appeared between her clear eyes. " I'll tell you what I think would be better than having the chairs done over. Let me take Alma's position with Mr. Dixon for a little while, so that you and she can go off for a wee bit of a change—no, Mother, I mean it. Alma is rather tired out—and it would do her worlds of good. I'm quite sure, anyway, that in the fall she can get something much better to do, and we can get along somehow this summer, even if one of us isn't making anything. To tell you the truth, Mother, I've been thinking pretty seriously of trying to find a position in New York this winter. Lots of girls who aren't any better trained than I am have gone there and are making very good salaries now. What I have in mind is a position like one I read of in the papers the other day; some collector was advertising for a girl, ' well edu-

cated,' etc., who could keep his files for him, and who could even be trained to attend sales of old books and etchings for him. I might as well tell you that I answered the advertisement, and that I'm going in to see him on Saturday. Now, if I get that position, will you and Alma promise me to take a little trip—or even, if you want to stay here, let me take Alma's place so that she can get a rest? I didn't want to say anything about answering the ad. because it doesn't mean anything yet, but if I'm fortunate, I don't see why we can't celebrate the way I want to."

Mrs. Prescott hesitated, laying her hand on top of Nancy's boyish brown one.

"You want to carry the whole burden, don't you, my dear?" Nancy flushed. She hated to look as if she were affecting a saintly and noble character, and she laughed at her mother's remark. As she turned her head to say something joking to Alma, she noticed for the first time how very quiet her sister had been while they had been talking. Alma was lying full length on the little bench, with her arm across her eyes. Evidently feeling that her mother and sister were wondering what was the matter, she took away her arm, revealing a feverishly flushed face and heavy eyelids. "I just have a beastly old headache," she explained drowsily. "It isn't anything but spring fever. Guess I'll go

in and lie down." She got up, and swayed a little, pressing her fingers to her eyes.

"You poor little kid!" cried Nancy, going to her in concern and throwing her arm around her shoulders.

"It isn't anything," said Alma, feebly. "I had it yesterday, too, but it wasn't so bad."

"Well, I'm going to see if you have any fever, anyway," Nancy said quietly, not liking the look of Alma's hot cheeks and crimson lips.

They got Alma to bed, and in a few moments after her head had sunk into the cool pillow, she had dozed off into a heavy sleep.

"You don't think—it can't be—anything?" asked Mrs. Prescott, looking up at Nancy from Alma's queerly flushed face. Nancy tried to conceal her uneasiness, but Alma had a fever of a hundred and one, which is not common to a simple headache.

"I don't think it's anything to worry about, Mother," she answered, slowly. "Only I think it would be sensible to have the doctor anyway. I think it's just overstrain. She isn't accustomed yet to working steadily in one place—and then the weather may have something to do with it."

But the visit from Dr. Bevan, cheerful as he was, did anything but set their fears at rest.

"She has a very bad cough," he said, as he

paused a minute in the hall outside Alma's room. "It may, of course, be nothing at all—I can determine to-morrow; but there are several cases of measles in the village, and in any event, Miss Nancy, I wouldn't go out to-morrow if I were you."

Nancy could only stare from him to her mother in speechless consternation. It developed next day that Alma had the measles beyond a doubt. In the morning Mr. Dixon and the Porterbridges were notified that the Prescotts could not be at their work. The situation was indeed a pretty serious crisis in their career; for aside from the fact that Alma was rather more ill than is usually the case with an attack of measles, their income was reduced at once by something over a hundred dollars a month, which, in view of the unexpected expense that Alma's illness would entail, presented a very serious problem. This worry, however, was completely dwarfed when, on the third day after Alma had fallen ill, Dr. Bevan announced that he thought it best to send a trained nurse.

"Is—is she *worse?*" whispered Nancy, turning a deathly white and half losing her voice with fear.

"It's nothing to worry about," he answered, though not in a very reassuring voice. "She wasn't so well to-day, and I don't like her cough. I think it would be wiser if she had the care of a

trained nurse. These cases are sometimes tricky, though, I assure you, you need have no fears."

But Nancy had had about all that she could bear, and without saying another word, rushed off, to bury her face in the sofa cushions and smother her frantic sobs from her mother's ears. It seemed to her absolutely certain that Alma was going to die, and her mind filled with little forgotten memories, each of which stabbed her with an agonizing pang of misery—Alma running to meet her down the country road, Alma in her pretty dress on the night of the Porterbridges' dance, Alma sitting right there, hugging her knees on the hearth-rug. Nothing, nothing would ever matter so long as Alma would get well again.

When she had gotten control of herself she tiptoed up-stairs to the room where Alma lay. Mrs. Prescott was sitting beside the bed, holding one hot little hand in her own. The room was darkened, but a warm breeze pushed the green shade from time to time, allowing a tiny beam of sunlight to slip in for a moment and then vanish as the shade fell again. From outside came the sound of a lawn-mower, the bark of a dog, or the rattle of wheels, as some grocer's boy drove past, whistling. And there on the bed, the light blankets drawn up to her chin, so that only her fever-red face and tangled hair could be seen, lay Alma,—a queer, differ-

ent Alma, who heard nothing and saw nothing but the strange dreams that hovered in her vague, aching brain.

"Dr. Bevan thinks she ought to have a nurse," whispered Mrs. Prescott, her eyes searching Nancy's face for some look that might reassure her. "Oh, Nancy, I'm afraid the child's very ill."

"No, no, she'll be all right," stammered Nancy. Just then Alma murmured a few incoherent words and moved her head restlessly on the pillow.

"She—she is a little delirious, I think," whispered Mrs. Prescott. "Oh, I'm glad she is going to have a nurse."

The nurse, a very tall, strong, rosy woman named Miss Tracy, arrived about noon-time and, quickly changing into her stiff white uniform, ordered Mrs. Prescott off to lie down, telling Nancy that there was no need for either of them to worry. Her presence, her brisk, thorough, confident manner, lifted a hundred pounds from their hearts, and for the first time in three days they drew a breath of relief. Mrs. Prescott, who sadly needed sleep, lay down in her own room, and Nancy, who had not been out of the house since Alma had fallen ill, took a book and went out onto the porch to free her mind of worries that seemed to have dulled her thoughts.

She lay back in the hammock, forgetting to open

her book, content merely to stare up at the flickering shadows of the vine-leaves on the ceiling of the porch, and to feel the light, warm wind touching her cheeks. Everything had become so complicated, it was so utterly impossible to know what was to be done, that she felt as if it were no use worrying, as if something unforeseen would have to happen to solve difficulties that were absolutely beyond their power to solve. And so she merely wondered idly how the nurse's bills and the doctor's bills were to be paid, and how they were going to manage to let Alma have a change, and what she was going to do now that it was impossible for her to see the New York collector about the position he offered. And finally, the warm air and the whirr of the lawn-mower, and the sleepy hum in the vines, made her drowsy; her eyelids fell, opened, and then closed again.

"Oh, yes, I'm a very great man. I know the King of England intimately," someone who did not look at all *like* Mr. Arnold, a fat, pompous-looking man with mutton-chop whiskers, who, however, *was* Mr. Arnold, kept repeating to her; and she kept wondering, "Why did I think he was so nice? Why did I think he was good-looking?" Presently she opened her eyes again and realized that she had merely been dreaming. Her eyes closed again, and through the veil of drowsiness she heard

the peaceful, rhythmic crunching of footsteps on gravel. Crunch-crunch, crunch-crunch—they came nearer, then all at once she heard someone coming up the wooden steps of the porch. She sat bolt upright, putting hasty hands to her tumbled, curly hair, and with dazed, sleepy eyes stared at the newcomer with a positively unintelligent expression of amazement. At length she articulated, in an almost reproachful tone:

"I thought you were in Europe. You *were* in Europe."

"Yes. But one doesn't have to stay in Europe, you know, unless they put you in jail over there, and I always try to avoid that," returned Mr. Arnold pleasantly.

"But you've been there for months," said Nancy, quite aware that she wasn't talking perfectly good sense, and then, being still slightly dazed, she added ridiculously:

"I'm so glad you *don't* wear mutton-chops. I think they are dreadful."

"Oh, I shall never wear mutton-chops," Mr. Arnold assured her warmly. "I never wanted to wear them in the slightest degree, and if you don't like them either, why, that makes it very nice, doesn't it?" And then they both burst out laughing.

"Alma is ill," Nancy told him. "She has meas-

les, and we are in quarantine, so you ought to go away."

He looked at her tired face, where the strain of fear and trouble showed in her pale cheeks and heavy eyes, and then he smiled in his warm, understanding way, and said gently:

"You've been worried to death about something, haven't you, Nancy? Well, I'm not going to ask you any questions now, only, whenever you feel that you want to, remember that you can tell me anything. I hope Alma isn't seriously ill. She is such a happy, pretty little thing that one hates to think of her having any pains. Would you rather I went away now and came back later on, when you are less troubled? Is there anything I can do?"

"Oh, don't go away—I mean, it's very nice to see you. Alma has a nurse now, and I think she is going to be better soon—and it's so *cheerful* to see you!"

"Does Mr. Prescott know of Alma's illness?" he asked, after a moment's hesitation. "I don't think my aunt does. She has just come back. I landed the day before yesterday, and came down here last night. I—I asked her about you all, and she said nothing about Alma's being ill."

"No, I don't suppose Uncle Thomas does know," answered Nancy. "He comes over to see us every

now and then, but then again he'll shut himself up for quite a long while, and I don't think he knows what we are doing any more than we know what he's doing."

"You know I'm buying a house here in Melbrook," said Mr. Arnold, rather irrelevantly. "A very nice house—do you know that yellow one, with the white columns and the porte-cochère over on Tindale Road? Do you like that one? I used to think that I'd like to live in England, and then, this time when I was over there, I suddenly decided that it wasn't nearly as nice as Melbrook."

"I do know the one you mean," cried Nancy. "It's a beauty. There's the loveliest old-fashioned garden ——"

"That's it—that's the one. I—you're sure you like it?"

For some reason or other Nancy turned pink at this simple question, and tried to stammer a casual reply. Then he went on serenely:

"I expect to have it in pretty good shape in a week or two, and when your sister is better, I'd love to have you and your mother and Alma come over and have tea with me. Aunt Eliza is directing the furnishing and all that—she's quite in her element, but I'd love to have your expert advice too. Heavens, *I* don't know anything about chintz, and scrim, and all that sort of foolishness—and Aunt

Eliza seems to attach the most tremendous importance to it."

"Well, it *is* very important," said Nancy. She felt that he was talking simply to amuse her, but she knew that he enjoyed it, and she was enjoying it very much. He chatted along, telling her about his trip, recounting amusing little incidents of the things that had happened on the boat, and completely carrying her thoughts away from her own personal affairs. But after a little while she began to notice that he was really not thinking about what he was saying, that he seemed to have something on his mind, which he was always on the point of saying, and then veered off to something else. All at once he got up and remarked abruptly:

"I've got to be going." With that he marched off to the end of the porch and as suddenly turned around and marched back again; and standing directly in front of her, said:

"What the dickens do I care personally for chintzes and scrim? I don't know which is which." Nancy stared at him, thinking that he had taken leave of his senses. She saw no reason why, all at once, he should grow so indignant about chintzes and scrim, or why he should announce in such a heated way that he didn't know one from the other. He rammed his long, brown hands fiercely into the pockets of his gray trousers, took them out again,

and thrust them into the pockets of his coat; then, as if he had taken a deep breath, and was holding it, he said:

"Will you marry me, Nancy?"

She could not have uttered a word. She simply sat and stared at him. Then, without being conscious of a single idea in her head, she jumped up and made a dive for the door. He caught her hand and made her turn around and face him. He had begun to smile, slightly, and it was that gentle, wonderfully sweet smile, half-amused and half-tender, that made her blush from the yoke of her gingham dress up to the edge of her hair.

"Well—will you? Goodness, why didn't I ask you before? I made up my mind to when I was in London, and I've been having nervous twitchings ever since. Did you ever realize what a very awe-inspiring young person you were before?"

"I—I don't know,' stammered Nancy; but whether it was that she didn't know that she was awe-inspiring or that she would marry him or not, she did not explain that morning, for with that she promptly turned and fled into the house.

Mr. Arnold stood regarding the screen-door with a blank expression; then, after a moment or two, he walked away slowly. It was not until he had reached the gate that he remembered he had left his hat on one of the porch chairs. He retraced his

steps with suspicious leisureliness; but Nancy had not come out again. He picked up his hat, looked at it absently, as if he did not quite know what it was for, put it on very slowly and carefully, and then, after several false starts for the door, took himself off.

CHAPTER XVII

THE OGRE CAPITULATES

ALMA was sitting up. Wrapped in a pink blanket, with her yellow curls pinned on top of her head, where they nodded like the heads of daffodils, surrounded by her admiring family, including Hannah and the trained nurse, and a perfect garden of spring flowers, which had been arriving daily since the appearance of Mr. Arnold, she was convalescing visibly. The window was open, but the door had been closed to avoid a draught, and she eagerly sniffed the fresh, sweet-scented air which blew in so softly that it hardly stirred the curtains.

"I like this part of it," she remarked, beaming on everyone. "I hope I wasn't awfully measle-y. I think if anyone is going to have a silly disease like measles, the only way to make it dignified is to be awfully ill."

"Well, you were very dignified," laughed Nancy. Miss Tracy was leaving the next day, and, with all the danger and worry past, it was easy and good to laugh.

"I didn't know that Mr. Arnold was back," said

Alma, burying her small nose in a huge bouquet of white lilacs. "Isn't it perfectly dear of him to send these things, when I only met him once in my life?" Upon which guileless remark Nancy turned a lively and hopelessly noticeable scarlet. To make her embarrassment quite complete, Alma looked directly into her eyes and grinned deliberately.

"I wonder why he takes such a tremendous interest in us?" she went on, mercilessly.

"He is a very charming person," added innocent Mrs. Prescott, who had been too absorbed in one daughter to have noticed Nancy's several futile attempts to confide in her. "He was here yesterday afternoon again, and was quite delightful, I thought."

"He's terribly courageous, anyway," said Alma. "Imagine braving the measles. Wouldn't he look funny with the measles?"

"He wouldn't even *get* the measles," burst out Nancy indignantly, whereupon Alma went off into an unaccountable gale of mirth.

"Oh, I feel so awfully happy, Mother darling," she declared exuberantly, laying her cheek on Mrs. Prescott's hand. Miss Tracy left the room just then, and Hannah followed her down-stairs to help her with Alma's early supper.

"Why do you feel so happy, my pet?" asked Mrs. Prescott tenderly, and then she added, "It's

strange, but I feel happy, too. Not only because you are getting well, my darling,—though, perhaps, that's really the whole reason—though it seems, somehow, as if ——"

"As if something were going to come out of the 'knitting-ball' at last," Alma finished for her. "I feel it in my bones. I feel as if something perfectly scrumptious were going to happen." Mrs. Prescott laughed and kissed her. In spite of the fact that their affairs were in a worse condition than they had ever been, nevertheless she felt in her old gay spirits. It made her happy to have her two daughters with her, and to see the vases of flowers, and to receive sweet, friendly little notes from Miss Bancroft, who, originally Nancy's friend, and not very leniently disposed either toward Alma or Mrs. Prescott, had grown frankly and equally fond of them all. She thought with keen pain of the two girls going back to work again, and yet to-day not even that thought troubled her. The feeling that the "knitting-ball" was going to reveal a surprise at last seemed to be general that early June afternoon.

"Now, Nancy, come on, and 'fess up," was the bomb which Alma hurled without a word of warning. "I know perfectly well that you've got something on your conscience, and I've got a suspicion already that it's Mr. Arnold."

If she was desirous of creating a sensation, she should have been amply satisfied with the result of her remarks. Mrs. Prescott, as if she had been suddenly aroused from sleep, opened her pretty mouth and stared at her elder daughter for a moment and then exclaimed:

"I must have been dreaming!" Nancy squirmed. She looked reproachfully at Alma, then at her mother, and at length said simply:

"He—he asked me to marry him." And then she followed with the whole story. She told them of her visit to her uncle, where she had seen Mr. Arnold for the second time, and then went on to give a full account of her memorable trip to the pawnbrokers' with the ring.

"I—I would have told you everything long ago, but I didn't want you to think that Uncle Thomas was 'relenting' because he asked me to visit him—I knew he wouldn't, and I—I was afraid of our deceiving ourselves with any false hopes when it was so necessary for us to get right down on the firm earth," she explained, knowing that they would really not be hurt at her silence. "And about the other time——" Alma stopped her by leaning over and kissing her.

"You were paying for *my* experience," Alma said bravely. "I learned—I don't know what exactly, except that people like Mildred, whom I al-

ways thought as being important to know, weren't worth one teeny little ounce of trouble. I learned to be honest with myself, and that it's a whole lot better to work with your two hands than to be a toady, for the sake of making things easier,—and lots else. And I'm going to work hard, Nancy——"

"Stuff and nonsense!" declared an angry voice from the doorway. From a gargantuan bouquet of hyacinths, lilacs, and daffodils, issued the voice of the "Ogre." Evidently, finding the front door open, and the lower floor deserted, and hearing the sound of voices from above, the old gentleman had borne his offering aloft, without a word of announcement. Snorting with some inward indignation, he testily tossed his head to get rid of an impudent lilac which was tickling his nose, and glared over the bouquet.

"This idea of working is pure foolishness. I never heard of such women's nonsense before in my life. Here, where in the name of common sense can I put these flowers, and why wasn't I informed of my niece's illness?" When Nancy, stifling her unseemly laughter, had relieved him of his offering, he grew calmer.

"Why wasn't I told that you were ill, my dear?" he asked, sitting down and taking Alma's hand in his own.

"We—we hardly thought of anything until she

began to be better," answered Mrs. Prescott. He looked at her sternly a moment, and then his whole face softened, almost to a look of humility and shame-facedness.

"Once you told me that you were a foolish woman, Lallie," he said, "and I must confess that for a very long time I was blind enough, and selfish enough, to think it of you. Now it's only fair that I should be as brave as you and admit that I have been a very foolish man. I have been about the biggest fool that ever escaped the badge of long ears.

"Whenever you hear a man airing his 'principles,' depend on it that man is a plain, domestic donkey." Having delivered this observation as a sort of text, he looked around at them all, and then, for no particular reason, smiled at his favorite, Nancy.

"A man with 'principles' is usually one of those perfectly ignorant people who think that they ought to take a hand in running this world as it ought to be run. They are usually taught better, in one way or another. All I did was to deprive myself of a lot of happiness, and to deprive some other very dear people of happiness that it was my privilege to bestow.

"I never realized how few people are given that privilege,—of adding materially to the happiness of

others. I thought that it was incumbent upon me, *me,* if you please, to act the part of the stern Brutus instead. I thought, I suppose, that the good Lord wasn't teaching you all as much sense as I thought you needed, and so I formed a lot of ridiculous principles, with which I proceeded to take that job upon myself. For ten years—more—I shut myself up in a house so big that I rattle around in it like a bean in a shoe-box. I tell myself that I'm not lonely. I say, 'I'm not going to give my money to three women who'll send it flying. I'll give it to some dog and cat institute.' This determination seems to me to be full of 'principles.' I take to science. Now, science is not to be spoken of lightly" (he looked a bit defiant here, but seeing that not one of his respectful audience was going to dispute this with him, continued), "but I will say that it does not fill *every* want. Nearly all, but not quite. I somehow couldn't manage to make myself quite happy, and somehow not even Science could tell me why I wasn't. I—I thought it was because I had never quite gotten over the death of—my nephew. And when I recalled how I—how I used to surprise him—used to hide things in his little stockings ——

"Well, anyway, *then* I had been happy. I used to be happy, just watching his face beam and his eyes shine—the truth is—I was always something

of a Santa Claus by nature. Now, why do you suppose Santa Claus always has such a jolly, well-pleased look, eh? Because the old rogue has been given carte blanche to bring all the boys and girls what they ask for, and in my experience, I have noticed that he brought 'em to the naughty ones as well as the good. He has no 'principles' whatever!

"Now, the truth is, that while my 'principles' were excellent,—they wouldn't work. They didn't do *me* any good. Hang it all! Here I was trying to make good, thrifty wives out of you two girls, for some young rascal—and depriving myself of the sweetest pleasure in life for that same impudent young husband who shan't have you, anyway!

"I think I must have taken leave of my senses—it sometimes happens to people who tie themselves up to a set of iron-bound principles—letting you all work, and worry, and make mistakes. But I saw one thing—I saw that, after all, the good Lord had furnished each one of you with all the grit, and the resourcefulness, and unselfish pride, and pluck, that you may ever need—to stand by a good man when he needs you—and then I buried my 'principles'—they are quite dead.

"They were excellent principles, too, their only fault being that they—wouldn't work.

"And now, ladies, I herewith adopt you. I shall

establish my legal right to you all. I—I feel—well, I hope I have made it quite clear, that anything, everything—on this green earth, that I can give you, is yours. And if you want to make me very happy, you'll demand it instantly." Having said this, he looked from one bewildered face to the other as if he expected an immediate torrent of requests. For a little time no one said anything, then, heaving a great sigh, Alma burst out:

"Uncle Thomas, I'll expire if you don't let me hug you!"

And when she *had* hugged him, until there was more likelihood of *his* demise than her own, he said, with a twinkle in his eye:

"I'm afraid I'm breaking up a brilliant business career for you, ma'am. The little that I can offer you is a mere nothing compared to the dazzling prospects which were opening before you ——"

"You needn't be jocose, Uncle," interrupted Alma, severely. "Many a millionaire started on only five cents, and *I* started on fifteen dollars!"

At this point Miss Tracy appeared with the tray.

"Why can't you all have supper up here with me?" suggested Alma. "Let's celebrate—everything!"

And so the little table was cleared off and spread for the feast. A simple one, of eggs and tea and Hannah's miraculous biscuits, with a jar of marma-

lade by way of "trimmings"; but a jollier occasion could not be imagined.

"I hear that young Arnold is buying a house here," remarked Mr. Prescott. "Now, what in the world is he doing that for?"

"Why, indeed?" murmured Alma, wickedly. "The truth is, Uncle Thomas, that he is madly in love with me. He sent me all these flowers, and, measles or no measles, he has been serenading me every night; hasn't he, Miss Tracy? Miss Tracy had to drive him away last night with two shoe-trees and an umbrella. But even that was hardly successful. It began to rain, and the umbrella was just what he wanted. I dare say he thought that I threw it out so that he would be more comfortable, and I suppose he thought the shoe-trees were for him to play with ——"

"Alma! You ridiculous creature," cried Mrs. Prescott, joining in the laugh at this nonsense. Uncle Thomas looked amused but puzzled, hardly certain whether to believe there was an element of truth in this rigmarole or not. Miss Tracy, a rarely tactful creature, gathering that a family council was in the air, took her sewing and went into the other room.

"Now, just be good enough to tell me if anything of that sort *is* on foot," commanded the "Ogre" in his most "ogre-like" voice, and frown-

ing ferociously. He glanced from Mrs. Prescott to Alma, from Alma to Nancy, and there his keen gaze paused. He was a good enough reader of faces to know now where the wind lay, and his eyes grew sober. He said nothing, but got up, and began to pace up and down the little room; then after a moment or two he stopped beside Nancy, and taking her chin between his two hands, turned her face up toward his own.

"Well, my dear little niece, you're pretty young," he said gently, "but one is never too young to be happy. It's only when young people don't know which way their happiness lies that we older folk try to hold them back. I thought I saw something of this kind—but it was only selfishness that made me cross. He is a very good man; otherwise, I should count his talent at less than nothing. And if George Arnold can add one little bit to your happiness, my sweet child, why, *I* could not be selfish enough to deprive him of that joy. What do you think, Lallie?"

Mrs. Prescott smiled, although there were tears in her eyes, and said:

"Ask Nancy, Uncle Thomas."

"Well, Nancy?"

Nancy tried to laugh, as she took her mother's hand and Alma's, and looking with eyes full of affection from one face to the other, faltered again:

"I—I don't know."

But here we, who can see into the minds of all these people, have no hesitation about saying in just so many words, that she did know very well; only she didn't know that she knew; or else she was simply exercising her feminine prerogative of not making up her mind until she felt quite ready to do so. Which was most probably the case.

CHAPTER XVIII

MR. ARNOLD GROWS MORE PECULIAR

"I'M going to walk up to Melbrook to get the mail," announced Nancy, poking her head into the room. "Want to come?"

But Alma, standing in a cloud of organdie, and hugging her bare shoulders, while the little seamstress, kneeling on the floor, pinned and basted, shook her head.

"Can't. Oh, look at me, Nancy! Isn't this going to be perfectly adorable?" she crowed. "See, it's going to be bound with a tiny little blue fold around the bottom to match the blue dots, and I'm going to cover my hat with corn-flowers."

"It's *darling!*" agreed Nancy enthusiastically. "A regular garden party dress—you'll look like a picture by Sir Joshua Reynolds."

"It sags just a wee bit, there on the right side, Mrs. Kniffen," suggested Mrs. Prescott, who was supervising the proceedings with a critical eye. "Nancy, will you get some more white cotton when you're in the village—three spools, I think, and two cards of the smallest white pearl buttons."

"And please bring me a nice fat letter," Alma called after her gaily.

Nancy put on her hat—a badly needed new one—pausing long enough before the mirror to enjoy its becomingness on her curly brown hair.

It was a delicious morning, and sometimes she found herself almost running with feet as light as her heart. It was not quite eleven when she reached the village, so she made her purchases for Alma before she went to the post-office, to allow time for the eleven o'clock mail to be sorted.

To her boundless delight there was a letter from Charlotte, a very long one, full of Charlotte's queer mixture of sense and nonsense, and containing in the midst of all this one sentence which made Nancy squeal with joy. "School, thank heaven, will be over with on the twentieth, and I want to see you so much before I go out West to join Daddy, that, if you'll let me, I'll run over to Melbrook for a few days, on the twenty-first. If you can't have me, you won't be able to let me know in time, but that's my fault for not writing sooner, so you are perfectly free to put me right back on the train as soon as I arrive. I won't be in the least offended—merely heart-broken."

"The twenty-first! That's to-morrow!" thought Nancy. "Oh, how glorious! What marvellous fun it'll be!"

It seemed as if everything delightful was happening all at once.

As she reached the street outside the post-office, she saw Miss Bancroft, who was just getting into her carriage, with that majestic slowness and dignity characteristic of a *very* majestic weight. Looking backward the next moment, Miss Bancroft saw her, and waved her parasol, beckoning to her to come.

"Do drive home with me, my dear. Of course, if I had a really strong will, I'd get out and walk with you instead, but I have no will whatever on this sort of day. Please be nice, and promise to have luncheon with me—just you and I."

"Oh, I'd love to, only can I leave these things at home?" replied Nancy eagerly, climbing into the carriage.

"Certainly, and give your mother and Alma my love. I'll see them to-morrow. Of course you have heard that dear uncle of yours plan for a sort of house-warming—tut-tut! There, I gave away a state secret. If you let him guess that I told you he'll have nothing more to do with me!

"But really, my dear, he's the happiest man on earth—he's positively childish."

"We—we used to call him the 'Ogre,'" said Nancy with a smile. "We used to be afraid of him, because we never saw him, you know, and it

seemed as if he must be awfully terrifying to shut himself up in that huge, dark house."

"How pretty you look, my dear," remarked Miss Bancroft, who had been watching the bright, young face. "Well, there's nothing prettier in the world than a happy young girl."

Luncheon alone with Miss Bancroft was a really delightful occasion. The French windows of the big dining-room opened on a shaded terrace, and framed, like a series of mural pictures, brightly colored bits of sunny lawn and gardens.

"I wish I could steal you for myself for a while," said Miss Bancroft, patting Nancy's hand with her small, plump white one. "But I should have a civil war on my hands, wouldn't I? It seems as if everyone wants you! Your mother and Alma, Tom Prescott, myself, and—well, quite everyone. Come, I want to show you my gardens. I'm absolutely pompous about them."

Armed with a basket, shears, a business-like trowel, and with a pair of disreputable leather gloves, Miss Bancroft set forth, followed by Nancy, who loved nothing better than to potter around, digging and raking the black, sweet-smelling earth. Miss Bancroft, with a gigantic farmer's hat on her head, to protect a still fine complexion of which she was frankly vain, chatted on, as she trotted here and there among her roses.

"So that nice Charlotte is coming to-morrow? I do want to see her. She'll be here just in time for the party, which is just right. My dear, don't you dare tell that uncle of yours that I even mentioned the party. But now that I've let the cat out of the bag, I might as well tell you that all of us are going over to his house for dinner. It's going to be out-of-doors, so let us pray that it won't rain. If it does he will probably have hysterics. I have been called into consultation upon every subject under the sun—and what with him and George, who has gone quite daft on the subject of his new house—which is charming, thanks to me—I think I am getting softening of the brain. Kindly *look* at this slug! Ugh! The vile creature! Murder him, Nancy. I *must* shut my eyes!"

When they had quite exhausted themselves on the joys of weeding and transplanting they went up to rest on the wide terrace, where Joseph, the very fat butler, brought them tea and delicious little orange cakes.

"These cakes are my nephew's especial delight," said Miss Bancroft. "I think he has some sixth sense that warns him whenever Lulu has made them. Now, *what* did I tell you!"

Sure enough, across the lawn, the shadow of his long legs looking like stilts, strolled Mr. Arnold, hatless, and beaming like a schoolboy.

"Have you eaten all the cakes?" was his graceful greeting.

He dropped into the wicker chair beside Nancy —it just happened to be beside Nancy—and promptly lent his assistance to the demolishment of the cakes.

"*I* haven't been idling," he observed. "I have been having a heart to heart talk with one of the most rascally carpenters that ever held a saw. My personality doesn't seem to impress him in the least. I think he discovered somehow that I write books, and that is enough to fill him with contempt for me. He thinks it's quite impossible for an author to know his own mind about practical things, and so he *will* not do what I want. Do you think I'd better *hit* him, Aunt Eliza?"

"Idiot!" returned Miss Bancroft amiably. "What *do* you want?"

"Well, if you and Nancy were nice and sympathetic, you'd tell me that you'd walk over with me, and conquer the man. You have *such* a way with carpenters, Aunt Eliza."

"Do you mean to tell me that you have the consummate nerve to ask me to walk half a mile, when I've been toiling all day?" cried Miss Bancroft. "I've had my tea and I don't intend to move. Why don't you make Nancy go?"

"Oh, I—I must go home," said Nancy hastily.

"Well, I'll take you home," returned George. "But there's a short cut right through my place, and I'd be awfully grateful if you'd say only one word in my behalf to that villainous carpenter."

So Nancy put on her hat, and started off with him. They crossed the lawn to the field, climbed over a broken stone wall, and following a little, meandering footpath through the long grass dotted with late daisies and long-stemmed dandelions, reached the new house by the back way.

The painters were getting ready to depart. The carpenter, a thin-necked, solemn-looking man, with a very long, frayed, dusty moustache, stared at George, and nodded coldly.

"Good-evening, did you get that trellis work finished?" inquired George pleasantly.

"Well, I done it your way, sir. It don't look right, but it ain't *my* house," replied the carpenter, haughtily. George looked crushed.

"Come on, don't you want to peek inside, Nancy?" He led her up on the wide porch, which formed one of the wings of the house. The long window was open, one of the painters being busy putting a last coat of white paint on the frame, and they stepped inside, into a large room, filled with furniture, but not yet set in order. The rugs were rolled up in one corner, leaving the polished, parquetry floor quite bare. The long body of a

grand piano was covered with a painter's sheet. Half a dozen huge leather chairs were huddled away under another sheet, but the big couch stood in front of the chimney place, and the bookcases were already filled.

"This is my study," said George. "Cool as an ice-house in summer, and in winter I have that fireplace where I dare say I could roast a whole ox, if my tastes ran that way. Over here is the drawing-room—a regular beauty—makes you think of Beau Brummel, and ladies with fans and scarlet heels." He led her across the wide, colonial hall into a long bright room that matched the study—a beautiful, stately apartment, with a polished floor, and brilliantly lighted from the west windows with the afternoon sunlight.

"It's the loveliest house I ever saw," cried Nancy, when they had finished a tour of dining-room, kitchen, laundry, and a delightful little miniature drawing-room which had once been a sort of den for some frivolous "blue-stocking."

"Just wait until it's all finished. The garden is the best part of it. Aunt Eliza wants me to have nothing but flowers, but down in my secret heart, I've always cherished an ambition for an—asparagus bed. And a celery patch. I know it's not ethereal—but I do love that smell of green vegetables when the dew has fallen. And I would feel

so proud if *I* could raise just one little stalk of asparagus all by myself. Don't you think you could make Aunt Eliza let me have just one wee patch of earth for some lovely, vulgar vegetables?"

Nancy laughed. She wasn't the least bit self-conscious and nervous with him, and he talked away quite as if she were—well, any nice girl, who took an interest in asparagus and celery. She wanted particularly to speak to him about getting back her ring for her, and she broached the subject to him when they finally set off for the cottage.

"I—I'd like to get my ring back, Mr. Ar—George," she began, stumbling over the name again. "I—could you—I have the money, you know ——"

"Of course! I'll get it for you to-morrow. To-morrow night. At Mr. Prescott's. Hang it—why didn't you—well, never mind," and as he spoke he put his hand in his pocket and as quickly drew it out again. Just as they reached the gate of the cottage he stopped, and looked at her severely.

"I just want to say one thing to you, young lady," he announced. "My name is George. Not Mr. Ar-George. G-e-o-r-g-e. Say it, or I'll keep you out here for a week."

"George," repeated Nancy, laughing shyly.

"Now say it again."

"George."

"Don't you think it's a lovely name?" he asked, ridiculously. "Say it again, and just see how pretty it is."

"I won't," rebelled Nancy, making an impudent little face.

"I'll give you something nice if you will," he coaxed.

"A candy?"

"No, not a candy. It's something I've got here in my pocket. See, I'll hold it behind my back. Now, once more!"

"All right. George. Now give it to me."

"You baby! Here. Now, *don't ask questions!*" With that he took her hand, pressed something into it, closing her fingers over the object, and took to his heels, like a shy schoolboy. Nancy opened her hand slowly, and stared. It was the ring.

"Why!" she gasped. "Why, he must have had it all the time. Ah!" And as she walked slowly toward the house, she tried vainly to make head and tail of the most complicated business transaction she had ever attempted.

CHAPTER XIX

ALL'S WELL THAT ENDS WELL

THE "Ogre" had sent a note to his nieces, asking them for dinner that evening, which arrived just as Nancy and Alma were setting out for the station to meet Charlotte on the eleven-ten train from Broadmore.

A little while later the three girls returned from the station, in a state of hilarious joy, chattering like a flock of birds, each one talking about what interested her most, and yet by some marvellous mental process peculiar to the sex, apparently quite able to hear and to exclaim over what the others were saying.

"What a perfect duck of a place," cried Charlotte as they turned in, under the arching elm trees, which had always given a dignified air to the modest little cottage which they screened. Indeed, "Paradise" wore a new finery of fresh paint, frilled, snowy curtains, and the new set of wicker porch chairs that were Alma's particular delight.

"And I'm really going to see the Ogre, too? Well, I'm through with school, thank heaven. Daddy, the lamb, thought I ought to 'come out' this winter—poor dear, he suffers perfect agony of

mind just hearing the words, so I didn't have much difficulty in getting him to let me go abroad instead. Won't I have a good time, though? Nothing to do but practise from morning until night ——"

"Hum—that's not my idea of a good time," murmured Alma, who had once been taught to play the C-major scale, and some "Little Piece for Little People," and had ended her musical education there.

Charlotte was completely won by Mrs. Prescott; her own vigorous, adventurous nature loving the older woman's beauty and femininity, just as on the other hand it loved Nancy's no less feminine courage and independence.

When Charlotte's small trunk had arrived, they decided to lose no time in beginning festivities of a mild nature to celebrate her coming, and coaxing Hannah to make up a picnic luncheon for them, the three girls set off to spend the late morning and part of the afternoon in the woods beyond Melbrook.

"Alma has changed, hasn't she?" commented Charlotte to Nancy, as they sat talking in Nancy's favorite spot, a little moss-carpeted clearing shadowed by a fretwork of leafy branches. Alma had wandered off into the woods to hunt for blueberries. "She always was a dear, but somehow she seems to have gotten sweeter—or something, I don't know just what. That thing Mildred did was

one of the meanest I ever heard of. I knew just as well as you that she had used that trot at the exam. I'd often seen it in her room, and when I was rooming with her I once started to tell her that she'd better not use it. But it wasn't any of my business. Of course she never admitted that it was she who left it on the desk, but half the girls suspected it. No matter what Alma did otherwise, there wasn't anyone who would have really believed in their hearts that she would do anything like that."

The shadows had begun to lengthen when the girls finally got up to go, tidily tucking away the scraps of their luncheon in the picnic basket.

"Uncle wanted us to be over at about five," said Nancy. "I haven't any idea what time it is, but we've got to hurry."

"Let's run," suggested Alma. "I—I'm in an awful hurry to put on my new dress. Oh, you ought to see it, Charlotte. I've been dying to put it on all day."

The others laughed.

"I remember one time when Alma was a baby, Mother bought her a beautiful new hat with pink rosettes on it—a regular Paris hat. Alma nearly went into convulsions of joy. She put it on immediately, and in spite of the fact that Mother told her it was only for Sunday, she simply wouldn't take it off. She screamed and kicked whenever

they tried to get it away from her. She wore it to breakfast, dinner and supper. She wouldn't even take her bath unless she were allowed to wear it in the tub. She held it in her hand while her hair was being combed, and put it on at once, when all her curls were smooth. They managed to get it away from her at night after she was asleep—it had to be put on a chair beside her crib—but she wouldn't be coaxed out of bed in the morning until it was brought to her. Then she used to put it on, and promptly run in in her little night-gown to show herself to Daddy and be admired."

"Well," Alma defended herself, "*you* had a pair of patent-leather slippers that hurt your feet and you wouldn't tell, because you were afraid they'd be taken away from you! Do you remember the time I got mad because you wouldn't play 'horse-and-carriage' with me, and I went to Mother and told her that you said your new slippers hurt you, and that you asked me not to tell?"

"I was perfectly furious at you, because you put me out of my agony," laughed Nancy. "They had little buckles on them, and I was awfully afraid that another pair mightn't."

It was a quarter to five when the girls reached home, and Miss Bancroft had already arrived to drive them all over to the Ogre's in her big carriage. Both she and Mrs. Prescott, already dressed

in their gayest, most summery clothes, were waiting on the porch.

"Well, so you decided to come back!" called Miss Bancroft. "You have precisely fifteen minutes to dress in, and if you are anything like myself it will take you nearly two hours. Fortunately, none of you have to take time to conceal the ravages of advancing age!"

Charlotte was the first to get dressed and reached the porch, looking distinguished and almost handsome in a dress of pale green linen, and a wide hat of the lightest and finest straw. And strange to relate it was Nancy who delayed the proceedings. Alma arrived second, as lovely as an old picture in her new dress, her blue eyes so frankly demanding applause that no one could help laughing affectionately at her innocent vanity.

"I think it's mean of Nancy to take so long," she remarked candidly. "*I* wanted to be the last so that I'd make a tremendous sensation. I don't know what she can be doing to herself. She's taken to prinking an awful lot lately. The other day she spent three solid hours on the loveliest morning in the world, trying to find some way of doing her hair that would be more becoming."

"It *wasn't* three hours!" declared Nancy indignantly from the doorway, where she had just appeared. "It was only half an hour!"

"Whew! Enter the heroine with a vengeance!" cried Charlotte.

"That dress is perfectly charming, Nancy," approved Mrs. Prescott, quite astonished at Nancy's overwhelming success with her appearance.

"You've gotten yourself up for conquest, haven't you, old dear?" teased Alma. "All you need is a jasmine vine, and some soft music by moonlight."

"I didn't know that anything more *was* needed," retorted Nancy, impertinently. She was deliciously conscious that a dress of pale gold-colored organdie, and a broad-brimmed hat trimmed with delicate blue flowers, were about the most becoming things she could possibly wear. And she was not entirely ignorant of the fact that she could be very, very pretty when she wanted to. It was pleasant to register this interesting fact on other people also, Miss Bancroft and Charlotte and the Ogre, and—well, George Arnold, for instance.

The gates of the "Ogre's Castle" were wide open now, and the old place seemed to have undergone some mellow change, no doubt sharing the same change that had taken place in its old master.

His house warming was merely the simplest and most delightful of little intimate gatherings to which he himself was an inimitably charming host.

They had supper out on the wide porch at the

back of the house, and afterwards, when the dusk was just beginning to fall, Alma and Charlotte and Nancy and George Arnold went off for a tour of the gardens, leaving the older people to chat on the porch, and watch a great red moon rising through the trees.

It was partly on account of the gathering darkness, no doubt, or partly because Alma and Charlotte wanted to look at the summer-house while Nancy and George wanted to continue to look at the roses, but however it was—well, there they were—Mr. Arnold and Miss Prescott, absorbedly looking at the roses. Or perhaps they weren't even looking at the roses. It's an unimportant question anyway.

"How—how did you happen to have that ring?" demanded Nancy.

"I—I don't know," returned George.

"Didn't you take it to that place you said you were going to?"

"I—don't know."

"*Wasn't* there any such place?"

"I d-don't know."

Nancy stamped her foot, and then she couldn't help laughing, although she bit her underlip to stop herself.

"Well, that's what you said to me, 'I don't know'—and expected me to take that for an

answer," said the astute George, evidently much pleased with his own cleverness. "Now, look here, Nancy, if you'll be a good girl, and say what I tell you to, I'll give you something nice. It's not a candy, either."

"Wh-what do you want me to say?" gasped Nancy, suddenly feeling quite terrified.

"First of all, put your hand in mine, so," he took her hand gently, and then lifted it to his lips. "And now say—'I love you, George!'"

"Oh—I c-can't!" whispered Nancy, feebly.

"Yes, you can. Try it, dear."

"I ——"

"Well, don't you, Nancy?" For the first time he sounded very grave, and his eyes looked anxious. Then somehow Nancy felt quite calm and happy and brave, and looking straight into his eyes, she answered him, honestly:

"Yes, I do. I love you, George."

After a moment or two, she looked up at him with a mischievous smile.

"Aren't I going to get my present?"

"You mercenary little rascal," he laughed. "Shut your eyes, and hold out your hand, your left one, please."

Nancy thrust out her hand straight in front of her. She felt him take it, and single out the third finger. Then she felt something cool slipped on it.

She gasped and opened her eyes. The first diamond she had ever owned caught and flashed back a moonbeam.

"Oh—I didn't know it was that!" she stammered. "I would have said what—what you wanted me to, anyway, George. I mean, *I* wanted to, awfully."

He promptly kissed her.

"Well, you can say it whenever you feel like it. Don't hesitate on *my* account," he teased, gaily. "In fact, if you never say anything else, it will be perfectly agreeable to me."

"What will be perfectly agreeable to you?" inquired Alma serenely. She and Charlotte, innocent of what had preceded their coming, had strolled up arm-in-arm. Nancy, being feminine, promptly put both hands up to her hair, darting a suspicous glance at the two calm intruders.

"What *have* you got on your finger, Nancy?" was the terrible Alma's next question, which, under the circumstances, was nothing if not personal. She seized her sister's hand and held it firmly.

"Look at this, Charlotte," she commanded, sternly. "What sort of a ring would *you* call it?"

Charlotte simply stared at Nancy.

"I'd call it an *engagement* ring," she finally declared. "Nancy!"

"What will be 'perfectly agreeable' to you—George?" repeated Alma, impishly.

"That, ma'am, is my own business," he laughed, tweaking one of her ear-curls. "When you're a big girl, I *may* tell you."

"Well," retorted Alma, "if you're going to be my brother, you'd better learn to treat me respectfully!"

"How do you know that I'm going to be your brother, may I ask?" inquired George. Alma treated him and Nancy to a mildly supercilious glance, as she slipped her arm through Charlotte's again.

"I knew it six months ago," she announced, coolly, as she started off toward the veranda. "*Women* know such things by intuition!"